

Part Two: Meet the Interviewees

Laurie Sommers and Timothy Prizer

- *Gillis Carter*

Born May 1, 1941 in Coffee County, Georgia, Gillis Carter spent the earliest years of his life as young boy whose father, Era Carter, was on the verge of becoming successful in the turpentine business. By the time Gillis was five years old, he lived in a house just a short walk from his current home on the outskirts of Willacoochee, and his father had begun hiring a fair number of African American turpentine hands to work the timber on land he leased from others. Under their father, Carter and his four brothers grew up working turpentine, and the only break Gillis would take from that line of work was the four years he spent acquiring his B. S. in Chemistry at the University of Georgia. He worked turpentine and hired countless others to work for him until 1978, when his father recognized that turpentine would no longer turn the profits it once had. Though the turpentine industry has vanished from the country, and though his primary human link to it – his father – has passed away, Carter remains more actively involved in the memory of the work than perhaps anyone in the United States. He continues to work four trees and six faces in his front yard, and one of his barns houses an elaborate collection of turpentine tools and artifacts. His goal is to remind those who may have forgotten about the industry and to educate the younger generation that may not otherwise ever learn to appreciate the livelihood of its forebears. Carter lives now with his wife and his mother-in-law in Willacoochee, and his children and “grandbabies” live on the property adjacent to his.

- *Anthrom Green, Jr.*

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. Although he grew up around turpentine camps, young Green was introduced to the business of turpentine at age 17 by his father, Anthrom Green Sr.; he and his father worked side by side. Anthrom, Sr. also hired out his son to work on various farms. The Green family lived across the street from a still in superior housing for African Americans of the time, due to the fact that Green's mother carried the Gillis name via slavery. As a young man Green worked various jobs in the turpentine woods, and he has vivid recollections of camp conditions, camp diets, entertainment, schooling and church, share-cropping and payment, the house that he grew up in, and the treatment of workers in different camps. Green left turpentine in 1938 and never returned.

- *Wilburt Johnson*

Wilburt Johnson was born on June 26, 1921 in the small Atkinson County community of Kirkland, Georgia. By 1932, at the young age of eleven, Johnson had literally followed his father into the woods and demanded to begin chipping boxes alongside his old man. He caught on quickly, and he worked in the forest industries for the remainder of his working life. In turpentine, he worked under a man for a number of years in Middleton, Georgia before working for Era and Gillis Carter in Willacoochee. Outside of turpentine, Johnson long-logged and worked in the pulpwood industry for several years. He only quit the turpentine business when it became necessary for him to

do so. The industry crossed the ocean and he crossed into old age. He spends most of his days now with his wife, his children, his grandchildren, and his great-grandchildren. Warm weather finds him in a rocking chair in his carport in Willacoochee, and he is remembered by all in the area for his memorable holler in the woods: “Can I Go?”

- *George Music, Jr.*

The only living member of his family that worked in the turpentine woods, Music was born in 1960 on the same piece of land where he currently resides on the rural outskirts of Waycross, Georgia. Music began working turpentine in 1967, when he chipped his first tree at the young age of seven. He used to follow his father, George Music, Sr., and grandfather around in the woods before he was old enough to do any real labor, and he would pretend to be working. Music says that he always wanted to be “just like daddy” when he was a boy. However, by the time he was 17 years old, he thought he had had enough of the hot and arduous labor involved in turpentine production. He headed off to get married, residing and working as an auto mechanic in Jamestown, Georgia. But “something always brings you back home,” he says. “You just get to missing it.” He returned to the massive expanse of timber at his home in Waycross after divorcing his first wife, and he is passionate about never leaving home again.

Music has only worked in turpentine on his own land and has never experienced life in a turpentine camp, a typical situation for many white, working class South Georgians. There are approximately three thousand trees on Music’s land that were used for turpentine production. His grandfather Louis worked and lived on the same

property even before the current Music home was built in the very early years of the 1900s. At any given time that he and his father were working in the woods, they kept in between 1,800-2,500 faces in production. George Music, Sr., however, supposedly once worked five thousand boxes at one time. Today, Music works as a locomotive mechanic and is a talented fiddle player and harmony vocalist in a local bluegrass band Tri-County.

- *Major Phillips*

Major Phillips was born in 1945 in Treutlen County, Georgia, and has worked in the woods for most of his life. He dipped the last barrel of commercial turpentine in August, 2001, while in the employ of Jim Gillis, Jr. of Soperton Naval Stores. At the time of the industry's demise, Phillips had worked for the Gillis family for over 20 years and is still in their employ as of this writing. Phillips' father had worked the pine woods for over 40 years, and young Major began working beside him at age 12. His first job was dipping tar, and he states that he and his father could dip as many as 2000 trees per day. Phillips worked for a number of employers in the Soperton vicinity and beyond, including the Claxtons, the Phillips, and the Kennedys of Cobbtown, the latter an African American family that had its own farm, still and turpentine farm. Along with turpentine, he sharecropped cotton, worked in a sawmill, and also worked cotton and tobacco on his family farm.

- *L.A. "Stick" Nelson*

L.A. Nelson was born in Spring Hill, Georgia on February 26, 1903. Spring Hill was a settlement outside Thomasville, Georgia, started by African American migrants from South Carolina. 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 twelfth and thirteenth birthday (1915-1916). His first experience in the woods was raking pine. Nelson's family moved from community to community in north Florida and South Georgia over a fifty year period, as Nelson worked in farming and in the woods. He held a variety of jobs in turpentine, including that of woods rider which was unusual for a black man at the time. His experience also put him in the employ of many different South Georgia turpentiners, among them Poole and Langdale, three generations of the Wetherington family, and S. W. Paul (sic). He met his wife, Bertha, when she was living on a neighboring turpentine camp. Nelson was interviewed for the project several months before his death at age 99 in January, 2004. He describes in great detail--sometimes humorous and sometimes painful-- his experiences over several decades as a turpentine, including camp conditions, bosses, entertainment, sports, money, self employment, food, education, religion, women and children.

- *Junior Taylor*

Junior Taylor was part of an extensive family of turpentiners. Nearly every relative in Taylor's memory, dead or alive, was involved in the production of turpentine

in one fashion or another at some point in their lives. In fact, Taylor, his father, and all eight of his brothers were employed in turpentine. Junior was perhaps the most well-known worker in this long line of turpentiners, however, and he was a household name in the area of Blackshear, Georgia right up to his recent death on January 21, 2004. Taylor made his living on approximately twenty turpentine camps throughout South Georgia and Florida, the first of which was in Mayday, Georgia, in Echols County. Shortly after Taylor's birth on a farm in Alabama, his mother and father moved to Mayday, where he would live the first 25 years of his life, starting his work in turpentine as a shirtless, shoeless eight-year-old. Taylor worked turpentine for about sixty consecutive years and racked up his high tally of camps due to both his and his father's escaping commissary debt, harsh woods riders, and crooked producers. The largest camp Taylor remembered living in had about forty or fifty other workers residing within it. The Taylor name is locally famous, due largely to the family's gospel singing group. The Taylor Brothers, with which Junior sung occasionally but was never an active member, was popular among certain clusters of gospel fans throughout Georgia, Alabama, and Florida and had a regional hit in the late 1960s, "Mother's Advice." Singing kept the Taylor family together during some difficult circumstances. Now the Taylor's nephews and brother have their own group, the New Taylor Singers.

- *C. J. Taylor*

C. J. Taylor, born approximately three years after Junior on the Mayday, Georgia, turpentine camp, began working turpentine as a barefooted ten-year-old, much like his brother. As they ventured together from camp to camp, Taylor worked in the woods

alongside Junior for about forty years. Though Taylor enjoyed the work like most turpentiners, he did not have the willpower to stay in it as long as Junior did. C. J. did spend most of his life working turpentine, but he was also more prone to fleeing the camp to find a different line of work altogether. While most turpentiners avoided being drafted to war and found little threat of actually having to go, C. J. volunteered for the Korean War. The war lives on vividly in his memory, both as a rewarding and haunting recollection. It is clear from speaking with him that he considers his stint in the war the most significant event in his life. After working together for so long and surviving the turpentine industry's demise, C. J. and Junior remained extremely close until Junior's death. Their homes sat side-by-side in Blackshear, and they remained the closest of fishing buddies even in old age.

- *W. C. "Dub" Tomlinson*

The life of W.C. "Dub" Tomlinson (born 1931), recounted in his self-published memoir *A Lad in the Piney Woods* (2002), typifies the old-time Wiregrass lifestyle of farmer, rancher, and turpentiner during the period of the open range in South Georgia. A life-long resident of Echols County--with the exception of a stint in military service--Tomlinson has worked timber all his life, first in turpentine, then a heavy equipment operator and harvesting supervisor. He also has been a cattle foreman; as he explains, even the cattle ranches had timber on them. Throughout it all he moonlighted on weekends with his band The Suwannee Troubadours, a traditional country group for which he was lead vocalist, and lead and rhythm guitar player. A gifted storyteller, Dub is particularly animated when talking about his experiences as a cowman, but his

memoir includes many anecdotes about turpentine men. He started out as a youngster working 532 acres of family land with his father. The best use of the piney woods was to work the trees for naval stores, graze cattle and hogs in the woods, and raise livestock feed and fruits and vegetables on small subsistence farms. Tomlinson's father only worked turpentine steadily for a year and a half, but Dub went on to work in turpentine for other employers in the region, including the Langdales and Wetheringtons, rising to the rank of woods rider.

- *Elliott West*

Elliott West, born August 27, 1920 in Darien, Georgia, has lived on countless turpentine camps since he was six years old. His father was employed on a camp in Brantley County when West was very small, and much of West's childhood was spent playing games with other children in South Georgia's and northern Florida's turpentine quarters. Having worked for over sixty years to harvest gum from pine trees, West knows little else when it comes to work. He remained active in the woods until economic factors ("They can buy it cheaper across the water," he says) removed turpentine from the area entirely just a few short years ago. His experience spans the era of turpentine quarters to the last years of turpentine in South Georgia, where he worked for Alton Carter until sidelined for health reasons. Carter and West were featured in the 1998 radio series, *Wiregrass Ways*, speaking about turpentine. West lives alone today in Folkston, Georgia, where he does landscaping for friends and neighbors. He remains friends with some former turpentiners in the area, especially Mr. Eddie Lee Scipp, whose name and comments appear in this report.

- *Patricia Wetherington Brockinton*

Born in 1935 in rural Clinch County, Pat Brockinton still lives on the site of Dayton Turpentine Camp outside Fargo which she and her first husband, Robert Wetherington, took over from her father-in-law in 1955. The property has its original commissary, woods rider's home, and turpentine quarters, disintegrating reminders of the business which the Wetherington's closed in 1975. Although this project did not emphasize the experiences of turpentine owners and operators, Brockinton's story provides an interesting perspective on the role of a wife in a family turpentine operation. In addition to the traditional woman's role of child rearing, cooking, and keeping house, Pat worked in a variety of ways in the Wetherington turpentine operation. Much of this revolved around the commissary, which she would open for the hands when they needed something, and in care of the workers. The latter included driving them to doctors' appointments, fixing plates of food dispensed at Christmas and New Year's, and providing medical care and advice. In the medical arena she was perhaps atypical: Pat had skill in both traditional medicine and through a nurse's aid certificate. She also assisted her husband in the yearly wintertime burn, and, for three years, in driving the truck to deliver barrels of gum to the Langdale still in Valdosta. Pat's first husband died in 1992. She married Ray Brockinton in 1996.

- *Willie "Coon" White, Jr.*

Willie "Coon" White, Jr. was born on March 21, 1948 in Hoboken, Georgia. White first entered the woods as a turpentine hand when still just a boy. His father

taught him how to chip his first box, and before long, he was a member of what his first boss man (Frank Dukes) called the “Little Boys’ Squad.” The group consisted of seven or eight boys supervised by a woods rider who drove the boys around on a tractor while the youngsters dipped gum. When White was 16 years old, he graduated out of the “Little Boys’ Squad,” quit school, and began working turpentine fulltime. He remained in the woods for several years before getting hired by George Varn to work at the Varn Turpentine Still in Hoboken. After several years of work at the still, turpentine began to dry up as an industry in the United States. The pines, however, remained as much a part of the occupational framework as ever, and Willie White fell into his current job in the sawmill at Varn Wood Products, also in Hoboken. Today, White lives with his wife in Hoboken, where he is a preacher at a local Holiness church and a talented gospel singer and guitarist.

- *Ralph Wilkerson*

Born March 11, 1949 in Hoboken, Georgia, Ralph Wilkerson was raised on a turpentine camp owned and operated by Frank Dukes. A childhood friend of Willie White, Wilkerson was also a member of the “Little Boys’ Squad.” By the time he was 12 years old, he had learned the ways of the woods while dipping gum with his peers and watching his father and other elders. The first seventeen years of Wilkerson’s life were spent in the turpentine quarters. At seventeen, he left the woods and entered the job corps before working in a machine shop, on the railroad, and finally for an asphalt plant in Florida. He returned to Georgia as a 25-year-old eager to go back into the turpentine business. He was hired at the Varn Turpentine Still in Hoboken, where it was his job to

unload the heavy barrels of gum from the trucks and roll them to the kettle for cooking. When the still closed, Wilkerson was hired on to work in the sawmill at Varn Wood Products in Hoboken where he works yet today. Wilkerson lives with his wife in Waycross.

- *J. F. and Bernice Wilcox*

Married in the Ludowici, Georgia turpentine quarters in 1940 at the respective ages of nineteen and fourteen, J. F. and Bernice Wilcox were each also born on turpentine camps. J. F. was born on a camp in Tattnall County, Georgia on January 4, 1921, while Bernice entered the world on November 17, 1925 on the Jasper County, South Carolina turpentine camp where her father was employed. Though J.F. spent his early years in the confines of the camp, he moved to Ludowici as a six-year-old and would never live on a camp again. At age ten he began work in the woods as a turpentine hand alongside his father. He learned to chip boxes the old way, cutting a cavity into the tree itself rather than tacking cups to the bark for the collection of pine gum. Mr. Wilcox would remain a turpentine hand until he turned seventeen and became a truck driver. He would eventually return to turpentine, but only for a brief period of time before leaving the industry once and for all.

Bernice Wilcox moved to Ludowici before she was old enough to recall having lived elsewhere. Her father moved the family to the Ludowici turpentine quarters in 1927 when Bernice was two years old. When she became old enough, she spent her time watching after her seven younger siblings, cooking and cleaning while her mother

worked in the woods weeding boxes. She only left the turpentine quarters when J. F. took her hand in marriage in 1940.

Today, J. F. and Bernice continue to live in Ludowici and have recently celebrated their sixty-fourth wedding anniversary.