

## **Part One: Introduction**

**Laurie Kay Sommers, Project Director**

*“Faces” in the Piney Woods: Traditions of Turpentine in South Georgia* is an oral history project of the South Georgia Folklife Project at Valdosta State University. It reflects the perspective of the field of folklore and focuses on the occupational folklife of South Georgia turpentine workers. For much of the past century, Georgia was the nation’s leading producer of gum naval stores, or the industry of extracting products such as turpentine and rosin from living slash and longleaf pine trees. The last bucket of gum for commercial turpentine was dipped by Major Phillips on August 9, 2001, outside Soperton in Treutlen County, Georgia. The end of domestic turpentine in the United States inspired the project team to interview former turpentiners about their lives and traditions. The work of gathering and processing the raw gum was done chiefly by African American men, although countless European American small gum farmers turpented on their own land or on land leased from others. These workers developed specialized knowledge, terminology, customs, and lore which folklorists call “occupational folklife.” This site contains information gathered from 1998-2004 through background research, photographs, video, and oral interviews. It includes information on work in the woods and life in the turpentine camps as told by those who lived it.

This project had its genesis in 1998 during background research for a turpentine segment on the Wiregrass Ways radio series, previously aired on Georgia Public Radio. The program featured Alton Carter of Racepond and his employee, Elliott West, of Folkston. At that time there were still some two dozen active turpentiners in southeast Georgia, working in an area from Soperton south to the Okefenokee. The nation’s sole

surviving processing plant, run by the Netherlands-based Akzo Nobel company in Baxley, Georgia, was within an hour's drive, yet competition from overseas markets was forcing domestic turpentiners out of business. Within four years commercial gum naval stores would be gone. Here in South Georgia, where the land and climate are ideal for growing pine trees, gum naval stores had fallen victim to high timber prices, labor costs, foreign competition, and alternative industrial turpentine sources. As I walked the piney woods with these two aging turpentiners, Alton Carter was philosophical. "He's the only one working for me right now," Carter said of West. "We dropped back. If I knew we'd have another year besides this--but they told me last year that this was the last year, and I didn't put any virgins up. It takes at least three years to get your money and get any profit. Two years you can't do it. It cost too much. I didn't put any up. If I knew I had another year I would have."

For nearly four hundred years, laborers and field hands worked the southern pine forests in the gum naval stores industry, so named for the rosin which sealed the hulls of ships and made them watertight. Slave labor was the backbone of the industry prior to Emancipation. After Emancipation, black workers merely shifted into a debt peonage system which did little to change their social status, economic circumstances, or power relations with whites. In South Georgia, gum naval stores, or turpentine as it came to be called, was especially important from the late 1800s through the mid-1900s. The industry had moved south from its colonial roots in Virginia and the Carolinas into Georgia and Florida. The latter two states were the last to engage in commercial turpentine. Florida briefly took over as the leading producer in the early 1900s, and then Georgia went ahead for good.

South Georgia has long been a lodestar in the turpentine industry. Indicative of this, the American Turpentine Farmers Association was founded in Valdosta during the midst of the Depression, a period when Valdosta became the naval stores capitol of the world. For much of the early twentieth century, the ports of Brunswick and Savannah had rosin yards overflowing with barrels waiting to be shipped around the world. Practically every small town in South Georgia employed workers in the production of turpentine. Beginning in the 1960s and 70s all that began to change.

For years, turpentine had been the dominant force in the timber industry. On that morning in 1998, Carter and West visited a stand of catfaces at the entrance to Okefenokee Swamp Park south of Waycross, on land leased from the state. Since their last visit, timber crews had knocked off some of the cups which were tacked to the tree face collecting gum. Timber companies were increasingly antagonistic toward turpentiners, according to these men. The chipped faces reduced the quality of the tree, and sawmillers didn't like the risk of hitting nails with their equipment.

At the twilight of the industry, the American Turpentine Farmers Association had worked with Alan W. Hodges, of the University of Florida's Food & Resource Economics Department, to develop new technologies to revitalize the industry.<sup>1</sup> Called the borehole oleoresin production system, it was designed to solve some of the deterrents to domestic gum naval stores. As Alton Carter described it, "Now you can use a plastic bag or a bottle and drill a hole in the tree, produce pretty good gum and less labor." But it was too little too late. "The foreign market came in so cheap and processors got word

---

<sup>1</sup> Hodges, A.W. and J. Johnson. A Borehole Oleoresin Production System in Slash Pine, Southern Journal of Applied Forestry, 21(3):1-8, 1997.

of buying it. They don't try to market our gum like they do the foreign gum. They substitute it.”

Turpentine was a defining occupation of not only South Georgia, but also of much of the American South. When domestic turpentine ended in 2001, *Georgia Forestry Magazine* marked the moment with an article entitled “End of an Era.”<sup>2</sup> It was more than that: for countless individuals whose lives and livelihoods had been tied to turpentine, it was the end of a culture rich with traditions, customs, and powerful ties to the land and environment.

This project focuses on the perspectives of turpentine workers. It touches on the technicalities of the work itself, but is more concerned with the ways in which these laborers lived their lives – their unique terms for certain people and places in the woods, the games and competitions they held with one another while working, skills in making or adapting the tools of their trade, stories and jokes, home remedies using turpentine, music and entertainments, and local knowledge about their environment.

The culture of turpentine was one sharply divided by race and gender. This is an industry with a checkered past, tainted by violence, racism, and an exploitative debt peonage system. It was also an industry shaped by ingenuity and resilience, skill and strength. It grew out of a time when knowledge of hand skills rather than machines was the measure of a person. As Alton Carter commented, “Got so much modern equipment doing the other work. Like pulpwood--got the machinery, saws and push saws, wages got so high to operate this machine, they took the work out of it. Nobody wanted to do

---

<sup>2</sup> Georgia Forestry Magazine. 2003. “End of an Era, Georgia Turpentine Industry Fades into History.” Spring: 4-7.

the work. Turpentine's a skill. Everybody can't turpentine. There's an art to it just like anything.”

The story of turpentine from the worker's perspective is, for the most part, a story seldom heard. The annotated bibliography included in this site compiles some of the best historical and ethnographic work on turpentine, especially as it pertains to Georgia and Florida. The best fieldwork on the folklife of turpentine from the heyday of the industry is from Stetson Kennedy's and Zora Neale Hurston's collections in Florida as part of the WPA Federal Writers Project, especially the material gathered in Cross City turpentine camps. Hurston and Kennedy both included this material in later publications (see bibliography). In addition, the original field data is available at the Library of Congress and the Florida State Archives, as well as in two excellent websites: American Memory: Florida Folklife from the WPA Collection, 1937-1942.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/flwpabibquery.html> (search turpentine) and Florida Memory online classroom, Zora Neale Hurston, the WPA, and the Cross City Turpentine Camp, [http://www.floridamemory.com/OnlineClassroom/zora\\_hurston/](http://www.floridamemory.com/OnlineClassroom/zora_hurston/).

Nearly 40 years later, the Bureau of Florida Folklife surveyed forest industries for the 1987 Florida Folk Festival program book and related documentation, but by this time turpentine was dying out in North Florida. In Georgia, Al Ike's and Ernest Melvin's 1978 documentary *Spirits of the Pines*, shot at the Powell camp outside Homerville, is perhaps the best visual record of actual work in the woods, showing the process of harvesting gum. Working with them on research for the project was Gay Goodman Wright, whose 1979 Master's Thesis, *Turpentine: An Ethnohistorical Study of a Southern Industry and Way of Life* (Department of Anthropology, University of Georgia),

contains rich ethnographic material on turpentine workers life and culture.

“Faces” of the Piney Woods: Traditions of Turpentine in South Georgia seeks to add to the previous body of work. Project researchers were Timothy Prizer, LeRoy Henderson, and Laurie Sommers. The majority of the final project report was written by Tim Prizer and edited by Laurie Sommers. It presents preliminary project findings, with an emphasis on Prizer’s interviewees. The project title plays on dual definitions of the term “faces:” first, faces as in catfaces, or the v-shaped wounds cut in the bark of the tree by turpentiners; and second, the human faces of the men and women who worked the trees and harvested the gum. We dedicate this project to them.