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FLORIDA FOLKLIFE PROGRAMS
INFORMANT INFORMATION SHEET

Accession No. _____ Date: 12/1/86

Project: Ela. Folk Art Exhibit Fieldworker: Barbara Seitz
Informant

Name: Dupree Ralph L
(Last) (First) (Middle)

Address: General Delivery

City: Esto State: Ela. Zip 32425

Phone: (904) 263-6907 S.S. # _____

Birth Date: 1/26/12 Place: Esto

Occupation: transportation provider for hospital patients Ethnicity: Afro-American

Appropriate to Florida Folklife Directory: Yes No

Willingness to Participate in: Florida Folk Art Exhibit

Special Requirements: help with transporting materials

Skill: barrel-maker (cooper)

DESCRIPTION OF SKILL: (how and when learned, how regularly practiced; how expressive of community values; quality of work; type of objects, music, verbal art produced; suitability for kinds of festival presentations; relevant personal background; other contextual information...)

Ralph Dupree is a tradition-bearer, a cooper, who learned his craft from his father. He is a native Floridian who learned and practiced his craft in Florida in a native industry. He still possesses the knowledge and skills necessary to perform the traditional art of barrel-making.

From the age of twelve until the industry left the area when he was 21, Ralph worked as a cooper, building barrels "from start to finish" for the Naval Store, a turpentine company which was for years "the only industry in Esto."

Ralph explained for me the entire process from "setting up the barrel" to "leveling the staves," "chiming out the barrel," cutting out and fitting in the head and "drawing it up." He described the raw material and tools of his trade: the staves, wooden hoop, compass, chimer, medal hoop, ax, hammer and driver, and the vice with a wire cable.

Extremely personable and energetic, Ralph described the still where the turpentine was prepared in a 500 gallon kettle with a cap over a 4000 gallon tank of water 14 feet high which congealed the turpentine into turpentine and water, leaving rosin as a by-product.

The men in his family had worked as turpentine stillers and coopers, a common occupation at that time. His father taught him to make barrels and at the age of 12 he became the youngest employee of the Naval Store. He learned quickly and soon became famous in the area for his skill. Mr. Morris, the owner of the Naval Store Co., would come to Esto and sit in awe, watching Ralph work and would tip him 50 cents or 1 dollar (the equivalent of five or ten dollars today) whenever he could. Then he would tell others about Ralph and called him "Superman". Mr. Morris told Ralph's parents that he was the most talented cooper he'd ever witnessed. When Ralph was 17 he built 100 barrels in a single day, while the average worker produced only 25 barrels per day.

For wages Ralph received 15 cents per barrel. The work day was 10 hours. During syrup season he would make some additional barrels to sell for collecting syrup from cane. These he sold for 5 dollars apiece. One barrel took him about 20 minutes, and the materials cost about 4 dollars.

When the Company left the area, Ralph went to work for the L&N Railroad where he worked for 33 years. During these years he served at various times in the position of porter, conductor, flagman, fireman, engineer, brakeman, and as an express agent, "calling the mail." Around 15 of these years he worked on the steam engine trains; the rest of the time he worked on a diesel engine.

Mr. Dupree is a highly articulate and intelligent man, outstanding in character and in his commitment to excellence in whatever he undertakes. He shares willingly his philosophy of life and the high value he places on doing an excellent job. He is an outstanding individual, a self-made man, able to overcome adversity through hard work. He has recently created a job for himself where there was none before. Having voluntarily provided over a year's time the needed service of transporting patients to and from doctor's appointments or the hospital, the Health and Rehabilitation Service subsequently recognized the value of this service and offered him a salary (retroactive) to encourage him to continue providing this service.

Ralph is an example of a tradition-bearer whose skill history has made obsolete. I highly recommend him for inclusion, if possible, in the Florida Folk Art Exhibit and in the Florida Folklife Directory. In order to give a demonstration in conjunction with the Exhibit or at the festival, Ralph would need help, most likely, with transportation of all the equipment involved. If he could get the staves (and he had an idea of how to accomplish this), he could supply or build the rest of the equipment needed to build barrels. He expressed interest in participating and would be willing to build a barrel but does not have any to show now.