

Interview with Acline Melton, Jan. 6, 2005

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Acline Melton Field Notes

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I learned of Mr. Melton, currently age 85, through his grandson Billy Rowe, who works at D & A Camera in Valdosta. I have chatted with Billy about various S. GA topics since arriving in Valdosta. I first became aware of Billy's connections to a lot of topics of interest when I took the Harper photos into D & A to be scanned, and Billy recognized folks as relatives. Mr. Melton was a beekeeper and worked in the woods sawmilling, turpentineing, and hewing cross-ties for most of his life. He began working in the woods at age 8 dipping with his grandfather, Moses "Moke" Washington Melton, but soon shifted to working with his father, Ezra (Izra?) Green Melton, known as "I.G.". After his father became too ill to work, I think Melton worked with his brother, but we didn't get a good chronology on that. The Melton's are related to Obadiah Barber and hold reunions at Obadiah's Okefenok. Acline remembers what the house was like, and told the guy restoring it that some of the things he didn't do right or left out. Obadiah's daughter, Angeline, was married to Moses Melton. She was apparently a gifted healer and made her own salves. This skill was passed on to Acline's father, but not to him. He recalled going with his father to visit a chipper who had been bitten by a snake. The woodsman or bossman had called him in. Note: Melton used the term woodsman, not woods rider. Ezra Melton also believed in the signs of the moon and the stars, the zodiac, something Acline also believes in. He gave some weather lore about predicting weather by the rising and setting of the moon. Also something about the zodiac and health, like when you should have surgery, when the sign is in the knees or something like that.

Melton's parents were members of Wayfare PB Church. He said his father was in the church until he entered the army in WWI. During a furlough he skipped out and spent 18 months "laid out" down in the woods and swamps here. He felt that after he had done this he should be taken off the church rolls. Acline is not a church go-er.

Acline lives in a modest frame house which he built? Or at least has lived in for over 50 years in the little town of Fruitland, east of Rt. 129 on Rt. 187. It is between Dupont and Statenville. When I drove up he was seated on his front porch on a battered wooden rocking chair, wearing a Alaska RR hat over his thick white hair. Billy says he is in failing health, but he was still walking on his own, the wheelchair his family had gotten him recently folded up against the wall. We talked at the kitchen table. In the living room, he showed me his family photo gallery. I tried to take pictures of his grandparents, Moses and Angie, and his father Ezra. There was also a picture of his parents with him as a baby. He was one of 9, all lived to adulthood. He and his wife Dolly Mae Chauncey had 6 children, 3 girls and then 3 boys. He said he had wanted 12 kids.

Across the hwy. from Melton's house was a large field of cabbage, collards, etc. which he put in with Tim (some sort of relative). Family lives in the nearby houses.

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Fruitland is one of those interesting little towns with a surprising history. It is right along the GA Southern RR line, in fact was a station stop. Much of Melton's memory of place is shaped by the RR, station stops and places that seemingly no longer exist on a map, like Thelmah (sp?), where he was born. Fruitland was a planned town that never got built; Melton said he had or had seen the map. There were houses, a town square, a park. He has pictures of the hotel that was once there (it burned), and a boarding house. He said they were going to put in a sweet potato packing plant at one point. The drive over from Valdosta, on Howell Road through Howell and Mayday to Fruitland, takes you through some of these small little dying communities, once identified with turpentine camps or stills and the RR. Fruitland had a turpentine still at one time. The land in the area at one time was leased by a Mr. Dukes from the Langdales.

I had a hard time keeping Mr. Melton on a coherent track of topics, so eventually the conversation just flowed as he seemed to direct it. At times I think he may have merged two questions in one story, such as the story of his forbearers escaping VA, then going back for their land deed.

I tried to question him particularly on turpentinizing in the Okefenokee (which he it turns out, didn't do). He did go coon hunting with his father in the swamp, walking in, supposedly going 12 miles in and out in a day. He did say he worked from Charlton Co. back to Echols. I also tried to question him on Indians working in the woods. He had never worked with any, but thought he'd see some on some "squads" --at least folks who didn't look black. He made a comment that a brother-in-law, who was supposed to be part Indian, looked more Irish than Indian to him. Squad was different from crew. I think I got the sense that a squad could be made up of several crews. I believe this was discussed in reference to working in the winter, where one man may have scraped, another raised the cup, etc. (Maybe 4-5 men to a crew).

I had not really ever questioned anyone about stories about Indians. He remembered things passed on by his grandfather, who he said remembered the Indian wars. Obviously, it must have been oral tradition to his grandfather, too, but Melton told a quite interesting account of one of the "massacres" during the Indian wars, which he said took place over near Waycross or Racepond. I asked if it was the Wilde family, and he said yes, but I might have led him on this. Recall that at Okefenokee Swamp Park the Wilde pioneer cabin has accounts of this "massacre" and that the Wilde family holds reunions there. I met a member of the Wilde family, I think during the Okefenokee music survey. Melton's was a fairly detailed account. He also had a story about Indian's leaving rifles somewhere, and about Billy Bowlegs. He thought that some Indians had come back to try to take back Billy's Island, but didn't recall names. There was no Indian background in his family, but apparently in his wife's? Billy has mentioned this.

Melton mentioned terms for the stages of working a tree: virgin, yearling, snatch boxes (3rd year), and puller. He never worked pullers. He mentioned that it was too hard, too much work. 32 streaks until you raise the cup. 10,500 trees= a crop. He recalled still seeing cut boxes (was this the term he used?) in his youth, where men dipped right out of

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the cavity cut in the tree. I tried to see if he had any explanation why box method went out (conventional wisdom written up is that it weakened the tree, caused disease, etc.). He seemed to tie it more to economics, that you couldn't work your way up the tree, as you could with the cup method. As for the end of turpentine, he didn't really know, thought it had to do with Hercules coming up with a way to make turpentine through their processing. He last saw turpentine around Fruitland 15 years ago or so, but didn't know who it was. Says he still finds catfaces out in the woods occasionally. They have torn down, taken out most of the stills.

His experience was one living in rented shanties, houses, but these were separate from the "colored quarters." They lived under the commissary system, and he described the credit system some: sounded like a ticket of sorts with different amounts to mark off on it. I didn't get a lot of detail on this. But he did say that a man wanted to take off \$6 a month for rent, and that's when he got/built the place he is in now. Couldn't see paying \$6/month for rent. Growing up his father always had a garden for food.

I tried to get more on local knowledge, weather, navigating in the woods. He basically said he just "knew" how to get around. One older turpentine got them lost at one point, but Acline knew where they had come in so he was never really lost. The most interesting story in terms of environment came on the second tape, when he talks about looking for bee trees in the woods with his father when out turpentine. They would use water sweetened with syrup to attract bees, who would then swarm and lead them to the bee tree. Honey was used for sweetener and to supplement income.

As we sat on his porch we saw some of the robins who come through this time of year. He says he used to shoot, dress, and fry up robins. Also doves.