

TAPE LOG

Name of person(s) interviewed: Wilburt Johnson

Fieldworker: Timothy C. Prizer

Date of interview: 21 February 2004

Location of interview: The carport of Mr. Wilburt Johnson's home at 200 Project Ave. in Willacoochee, GA.

Other people present: N/A

Brand of tape recorder: Radio Shack CTR-122

Brand and type of tape: Maxell XLII

Tape Number: 04.2 (Fieldworker's designation)

SUMMARY DESCRIPTION OF TAPE QUALITY (background noise, etc.)

Mr. Johnson speaks audibly throughout the recording, his deep speaking voice loud enough for the tape recorder. The occasional car passes by his house, sometimes with music playing, but for the most part the recording is superb.

SUMMARY DESCRIPTION OF TAPE CONTENTS

Mr. Wilburt Johnson speaks of his life working in the turpentine woods of south Georgia. Mr. Johnson worked for a number of people throughout his career in turpentine, one of which was Era and Gillis Carter.

TAPE INDEX

COUNTER NO.

SUBJECT

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| 001 | Opening announcement |
| 008 | Wilburt Johnson was born in Atkinson County, about five miles outside of the small community of Kirkland, Georgia. He was born on June 26, 1921 and married in 1939. He worked various forest industries all his life, until he got to be too old. In addition to turpentine, he worked in pulpwood and long logged. Mr. Johnson worked turpentine for a Mr. Finley (?) for twelve years in Middleton, GA. Then, he worked in pulpwood, short logged, and long logged. After that, he began working turpentine for Era Carter and continued to for six years. "So," Mr. Johnson begins, |

"I've been doing a lot of hard work in turpentine, pulpwood, long logged, and all that all my life. I know what work is, what *hard* work is."

Children and Schooling

030

Mr. Johnson started working turpentine when he was just 11 years old. At that point, he worked with his father. Mr. Johnson's father was the first in his family to work in the turpentine business. Turpentining is all his father knew. Wilburt passionately wanted to follow in his father's footsteps. He recounts,

"That's all he used to do was turpentine, you know. And so, when he brought us up, I got big enough to work, I wanted to go to the woods with him. And I wasn't big enough. So, whenever I got big enough, he had an old hack. And so, I got that hack, I go out there in the corner, and chip on some old black gum trees, you know. And learned how to swing the hack you know. So one day, he was [passing car] chipping some boxes around here about two miles from home, where we were staying at. So, I had to hoe some cane. Well, I got through hoeing that cane and everything, and I said, 'I'm going to the woods where Papa at.' And I got my hack, and I went out there. He was down there in a little ol' round pond chipping. And he was *bad* to talk to hisself, you know. But he was down there talking to hisself. And I said, 'Well, I wonder who he's talking with.' So, I was standing up out there on the log you know. And I got to where he could see me. He said, 'Boy, what you doing over here?' I said, 'I come to help you chip some.' 'Well, chip one out there and let me see how it is.' I chipped one and waited 'til he got there. He looked at it, 'Let me see your hack.' Got my hack and cut it out you know and sharpen it up. And I chipped on with it all that evening. And, the old hack wasn't very much. So, he told me, he said, 'Well, son, bring your old hack in and I'll get a good 'un and fix it up and let you come back and help me.' So, he did. And I started chipping then. And from then on, on up to right now – chipping, dipping, pulling, pulpwooding, long logging, and all that ever since, right on up to now."

064

Before Wilburt turned 11 years old and wandered out into the woods on his own accord, his father had never mentioned the boy's potential future in turpentine. "He figured I was too small to be out there, but I wasn't scared," Mr. Johnson says. "I'd go out there in them woods and stay all day, chipping boxes." No one really ever

taught Wilburt to work. As a boy, he used to practice swinging the hack on his own in the yard. Later, he started chipping on black gum trees for further practice. "Then," Mr. Johnson says, "after I learned how to cut a pretty good streak, you know, I said, 'Shoot, I'm going in the woods where Papa at, and help him.'" Mr. Johnson again tells the story of the first tree he chipped alongside his father.

- 084 On that first day in the woods with his father, Wilburt says that his father found his son's work satisfactory and decided to get him a better hack. The following Saturday, his father went into town and bought him a better hack. From then on, Wilburt was a turpentine. When he first started, Wilburt worked a total of 12,000 boxes with his father. Even though he was a small child, Wilburt can remember his father bragging on him early on, saying that he was a good chipper. The first tree Mr. Johnson chipped at the young age of 11 was in Kirkland, GA. Neither Wilburt nor his father ever worked on a turpentine camp. In Kirkland, they lived and worked on a place called Johnson's Settlement, not far from the New Bethel (?) Church. Mr. Johnson was born just a few hundred yards from that church. On the same piece of land, Mr. Johnson also dipped gum with a man named Jeff Vernon. Also with Mr. Vernon, Wilburt worked at the sugar mill and made syrup. As payment, Mr. Johnson received a gallon of syrup a day and dinner.
- 120 Mr. Johnson went to school as a boy until the fourth grade. The school was very nearby the place where he worked. [Wind blows plastic cup across the concrete carport floor] School for Mr. Johnson in those days only lasted six months out of every year. Mainly, he worked for six months and went to school for six months. But because his family was poor and because he was the only boy old enough to help his father work, he spent a lot of time in the woods when he was technically supposed to be in school. When he had to miss school to help his father work, the school administration rarely said anything. Work held precedence over school.
- 153 When Mr. Johnson was working in the woods as a boy, he was up early each morning to walk the two or three miles to the woods. Usually, he didn't return home until sundown. Breakfast was normally eaten at home, while lunch was carried into the woods. [Mr. Johnson's grandson approaches and tape is stopped for just a few minutes] In Mr. Johnson's lunch pail he would carry peas, bread, and meat. As "poor folks," he says, he nor his father every had any "fancy foods" to take into the woods with them. Also,

foods that had to be kept cool were not an option for they would spoil in the woods.

176 Lunch was the only real break Mr. Johnson remembers having in the woods. He did, however, have the chance to get a drink of water in the woods at any time he pleased. The money he made from working in the woods went directly to his father, who would then give him a little as an allowance. With the money, Wilburt remembers buying soda water and candy, specifically peanut brittle, which only cost a nickel at the time.

197 Mr. Johnson only worked with turpentine mules after he had married. Under Era Carter, he began working in the woods with mules for the first time. He explains that it was during dipping season that the mules were most common, and even then, he and other workers tended to transport the barrels along the ground rather than on mules and wagons. But nevertheless, he did have some experience working with mules. He remembers that the first mule he every worked with was named "Pet," perhaps a testimony to the fact that many of the animals were treated more as pets than as merely working animals. He also remembers a mule named "Bill." The mules, he remembers, showed their intelligence through a number of ways. Some of them would come when called.

236 When acid was introduced into the woods to increase the trees' production was when "everything started changing," Johnson recalls. He says that workers were not totally opposed to the acid when it was introduced, but that many did complain of the fact that the acid ate holes in their clothing when it splattered or the wind blew it backward.

Knowledge, Innovation, and Coping With Danger

"Sometimes, you'd be out there and it'd be blowin', and you'd look like somebody done shot you with buckshot where that acid done eat, you know, through your clothes," he says. If the acid got on your skin, it only stung a little and caused no real harm. Keeping it out of the eyes was the main concern.

"It Just Sounded Like a Song, All Day Long"

266 Normally, Mr. Johnson worked in the woods by himself as he got older. Every now and then, his cousin did chip boxes alongside him. Nevertheless, Gillis Carter has dubbed Mr. Johnson one of the best workers he's ever had working for him and "the ringleader of the blacks" – of the workers with whom he shared the woods. Mr.

Johnson explains that whatever the task was in the woods, he was normally performing better than any other worker in the woods. When tacking tin one day with four or five other workers, Wilburt received the nickname "Ringleader" for his superior work.

Tacking tin, Wilburt Johnson was well known for his unique holler – "Can I Go." To this day, Gillis Carter refers most commonly to Wilburt Johnson as simply "Can I Go." Mr. Johnson insists that there is no in-depth story to explain how he came up with the call. "It just come into my mind, you know," he says. He told the tallyman from day one that he wanted to holler "Can I Go." Wilburt also denies that the call was posed as a question – "Can I Go?" – seeking to gain permission needed to move onto the next tree and asking if the tree had been worked satisfactorily. It was merely a noise that told the tallyman to put another pencil mark beside the name Wilburt Johnson, he maintains. Johnson remembers that his father always hollered "Three" while a cousin hollered "Cannonball" and a friend hollered "Five" in a deep, droning voice. "Boy, you could hear him *way* 'cross the woods there, hollering that 'Five,'" Mr. Johnson recalls. All three of these hollers belong to now-deceased former turpentiners.

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Near Kirkland, GA, where Mr. Johnson was born, he remembers working in an area of the piney woods referred to colloquially as "Roundabout." "Roundabout" was a pond in which workers commonly worked turpentine. "A lot of people got rich in 'Roundabout,'" Johnson says, "making moonshine whiskey." A lot of moonshine was made in the turpentine woods, though as far as Mr. Johnson knows, no workers made it or bothered with it when they encountered it. "We didn't ever make none. We'd see it and all, but we didn't bother it. Just went ahead on. It wasn't ours, so we didn't mess with it," he says. One man in the woods that Johnson recalls had 10-12 barrels of mash that he hauled to the still to make moonshine whiskey.

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Very rarely was Mr. Johnson or any other worker really afraid of any creature in the woods. The most feared was a rattlesnake. But a bark hack would take care of a rattlesnake in a heartbeat. "You hardly ever hear tell of a man working in the woods turpentine getting snake bit," he says. The reason for this is that the snakes and the workers learn each other's habits, each other's routines in the woods. Only occasionally does Wilburt remember seeing a rattlesnake in the woods, and even then, it was easy to kill them with a tree limb. Yellow jackets were also feared, but they were

usually easily spotted before any real danger could unfold. All a worker could do when he came upon a bunch swarming around a nest was to “just shun ‘em,” Mr. Johnson says. He recalls that at his current home, he has seen a swarm of bees in both a bush in his front yard and a tree in his back yard. Each time, he took care of the problem with a call to his local pest control serviceman. Bears were never a problem for Mr. Johnson in the woods like they have been for some other workers. Even though he most commonly worked in the woods alone, he never worked in fear of any animals or insects.

Knowledge, Innovation, and Coping With Danger

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In order to navigate through the thick of the pines, Johnson says, one merely had to work in them long enough to get to know them. It was just like anything else you learn to do, he says. It was matter of drifting through the woods from tree to tree and following a pattern. Only once did Wilburt get lost.

“I got lost out there one time. Well, what happened, I was chipping and I was going my same route all the time. And I come up to – down there at the New Bethel (?) Church – and I was about to hit it. And there was a drain there. And I stepped across that drain. I wasn’t supposed to do that. I go down this side and when I come back, I come up on the other side. But I stepped across for some reason or another. I don’t know why. And I stepped across there and I got just as lost as I could be. And I stood up there and I looked. I was out there by myself. And I looked and I looked. I said, ‘Well, where in the world is I’m at?’ I looked down a while, I looked up there and I saw the church. And my mind got to coming back where I was at. And I stepped back across that ditch there, and I come back together.”

Darkness never caused a problem for his sense of direction either. In fact, he and his father used to stay out in the woods chipping until darkness fell among the pines. Eventually, his father would call for him across dimness and they would track each other down and walk home for the day. At this young age, Wilburt was more than ready to get out of the woods by this time of day.

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Though a lot of workers were given nicknames in the woods, Wilburt never had one. One man named Edward went by the nickname “Boot.”

486

Wilburt was never injured badly enough in the woods to have to receive any type of medical assistance, but he does remember that

several things were used as medicine in the woods. Searching for a scar on his hands, he recalls one instance in which he was holding a pair of tin pullers when he fell and jabbed himself in the hand with them. He is now unable to find the scar. Upon injuring his hand, he went home from the woods and his mother applied some tar and tallow to the wound before bandaging it up. Gum and turpentine were both used as medicines as well. Turpentine was used for colds, Mr. Johnson says.

- 526 Though Wilburt normally carried water with him into the woods each day, he would occasionally run out and have to find other sources of water to drink. On occasion, this meant drinking the water that gathered in the cups on the trees after a rain. The water in the cups tasted like gum and it was certainly not pleasant. "But I drunk I many swallow of it," Johnson says.
- 545 Outside of work, recreational activities also took place in the woods. Fishing was the most common of these. Most of the fish that Johnson and his fellow woodsmen caught were cooked and consumed as food. The best of all the fish, Johnson says, was the red pipefish. "Boy, let me tell you, that was a good fish," he says. "You know, get him and fry him and pull his head off. And he had that backbone. You just pull that backbone out and all that stuff you can eat." Hunting was also common, but Johnson did very little of it himself. Those who did hunt hunted squirrel, possum, raccoon, and rabbit most commonly. All of these animals were considered edible.
- 588 Singing was an everyday diversion for workers in the woods. The songs ranged from blues to church songs. One man, Roy Pittman, used to sing a song called "Louise" all the time while dipping. Mr. Johnson demonstrates, "Louise / Sweetest girl I ever known." According to Mr. Johnson, Roy Pittman projected his song over miles throughout the woods. Though Mr. Pittman tended to sing while dipping, singing in the turpentine woods took place at all times and with all types of work. "You'd get out there and get to feelin' good and all, and you would get to hollerin', singin', whistlin', and all like that. The song "Louise" that Mr. Pittman sang was from a record that was often played on television.

[End of Side A]

[Begin Side B]

004 Mr. Johnson says he can't recall any sayings, words-of-the-wise, or turns-of-phrase that were used in the woods to give advice, admonish, or observe. Workers did play a few jokes on one another in the woods, but most of the time they simply whistled, hollered, and sung while working. [Phone begins ringing; Mr. Johnson decides he needs to answer it; tape stopped for 20-minute break] Workers' jokes were about an array of subjects, most of which referred to women or a coworker in the woods. [One of Mr. Johnson's great grandsons come up behind him in the carport; tape stopped for a minute or two] Girlfriends were sometimes the subjects of jokes, all of which intended to "get a big laugh."

Initiating New Workers (No section in original paper for this)

035 It was rare that a new worker in the woods ever ventured out among his new coworkers and new pines with a cocky attitude. But when it did happen, Mr. Johnson says,
"We'd just tell him, say, 'Now, you out here amongst us now. You got to do like we say do. Or do what supposed to be done. You don't come out here, now, and rule nothing. And change, try to change nothing. Everything gonna be just like it is.'"

Usually though, workers got along well. Mr. Johnson says that he remembers some instances in which workers would play tricks on new workers, but he remembers no specific times well enough to recount.

056 The worker who worked the hardest in the woods would naturally develop some degree of local fame for his superior skills. More than any games or contests, workers usually proved their worth in the woods simply by working harder than anyone else. The turpentine worker who had more to show for his work – whether it be boxes chipped, cups tacked, or barrels dipped – generally was able to claim the title for the best worker, or the "ringleader" in Wilburt Johnson's case. "You had to do something or another to prove that you *is* the best," Mr. Johnson says. Wilburt explains that he did more of everything in the woods than the other workers. When he got to working, he explains, all of his bosses used to love to hear him holler "Can I Go." A lot of workers tried to compete with Mr. Johnson in the woods, but very few were able to beat him. There were a select few, however, that were better than he was, he admits. Usually, Wilburt says, he had no problem beating the "young bucks" in the woods.

081 Wilburt says that he used to know the jokes and stories – also known as “lies” – common in the woods, but time has caused his memory to fade. Discussions in the woods among workers tended to revolve around subjects such as plans for the weekend after an upcoming payday. Jokes were also common in the woods.

096 Turpentiners developed a traditional knowledge in the woods that alerted them to signs of imminent bad weather. Wilburt Johnson explains, “Now, sometimes, you know, it’d be an old bird – some type of bird, you know – be whistlin’... They’d say that’s the sound of rain or sound of bad weather.” [Mr. Johnson’s great grandchildren converse in the background. Mr. Johnson introduces the fieldworker to the children] Mockingbirds and robins were both believed to expel sounds that pointed to looming storms.

111 Mr. Johnson has not been able to attend any festivals or celebrations commemorating the turpentine industry.

“From the Womb to the Tomb”: The Commissary...

115 On payday, Mr. Johnson went to the commissary to pick up his paycheck. There at the commissary on paydays, workers sat around and told jokes, none of which is Mr. Johnson able to recall so many years later. He does remember one gem of traditional expression from the commissary, however:

“When somebody had a little young baby, and the baby be cryin’ and all, you get that baby and get to shakin’ him, and they had a little ol’ song they used to sing.

Onion in the middle and the pickle on top
Make your lip go to flippity flop
Go Stamey go (??)
Hog in the biscuit
Don’t come to get it, I’ll eat it myself
Who is dat?
Dat I.

“I learned that one way back... My daddy and ‘em, they used to – whenever they have babies and all – and they get to crying, that’s when he’d sing that song. And you take my granny [great grandchild] ... I got a little granny. They stay up in Tifton there. And I was up there about two or three weeks ago. And she started to whinin’ and I started to singing that song... Whenever I went up there, they’re, ‘Pawpaw, we want you to sing that song!’”

The nursery rhyme, Mr. Johnson says, was common in the woods as well as in and around the commissary. Also around the commissary, workers sat on the commissary porch and talked about

women and other things. [Mr. Johnson's great grandsons open canned soft drinks and speak to one another in the background]

165 Though turpentiners and their families used to make furniture out of the fallen timber on turpentine farms, Mr. Johnson recalls none of this around where he worked. He explains that the chair he is sitting in cost him \$100 dollars in Lapaha, GA. It is likely made of cypress, he explains.

183 Mr. Johnson says that he has heard of a place called "Diddy-Wah-Diddy," but that he can't remember anything about it. He does remember his father saying, "I'm gonna do such and such a thing if I have to go to Diddy-Wah-Diddy." [Fieldworker explains that it is commonly known as a comic utopia] "It might be," Mr. Johnson says. "I ain't never been there."

Nature's Best Medicine: Pure Turpentine

204 Mr. Johnson vividly remembers the smell of cooking turpentine at the still. He says that he enjoyed the smell. In fact, ingesting the gum and the smoke is believed to be healthy. Wilburt Johnson explains:

 "They tell me – people who worked turpentine, you know – they live a long time. They say that smelling that there rosin and that water and stuff, you know. And said it was good for you, healthy for you. And, you know, you take a lot of them ol' turpentiners, they lived until they got way on up in age... My daddy used to turpentine all his life, and he was... around a hundred years old when he died."

224 Women worked in the woods too occasionally. Mr. Johnson remembers a woman named Eva who used to dip in the woods alongside the men. She was a good worker. "Ol' Eva would get out there and swing a dip bucket like a man," Wilburt recalls. He says that there were other female workers as well, including one of Wilburt's sisters and one of his cousins. These two female relatives of Wilburt's helped his grandmother dip some gum. The women, Mr. Johnson says, were treated much like the men in the woods. They were rarely, however, required to work in the swampy areas of the woods. They tended to work on the hills and the edges of the woods. [Car horn honks]

248 As Mr. Johnson got older and continued to work in the woods, his paydays became a bit different than when he was younger. He still went to the commissary to buy groceries, but he also went into town to drink, gamble, and listen to live music. Several workers

gambled themselves into debt and were forced to borrow more money.

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People in the community who did not work in turpentine tended to treat workers with the respect they deserved. There were some also, however, who acted like “roughnecks,” Johnson explains. These were those who looked down upon turpentiners because of their occupation. Never did Wilburt have to personally endure any mistreatment from those in the community who found work in arenas outside of the woods. Most of Mr. Johnson’s bosses were very good men, he says. Era Carter used to drink quite a bit, and for Christmas, he usually bought a fifth of liquor for Mr. Johnson. Many bosses, Mr. Johnson explains, were not so kind. Many simply wanted their hands to work and cared little for their quality of life. Johnson explains that if he was treated well by one boss, he saw no reason to leave. This explains why he chose to work for many of the same men for years at a time. He was lucky though. He explains that some bosses were so bad that the workers had no choice but to find a new place to work. Johnson remembers bosses cussing workers out and, even worse, some tried to beat their workers. These “mean and hateful” men, Johnson explains, oftentimes physically abused their workers for no reason – just because they “thought they could.” Also, he explains, they knew nothing would be done about it, and almost always this was the case. Fortunately, Mr. Johnson was never subjected to such punishment.

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Asked about the life lessons turpentine taught him, Mr. Johnson mistakes the question for techniques he learned in the woods. He explains how learning how to use sulfuric acid to increase the resin flow was a technique he had to learn in the woods. He also explains that a sharp wood hack would work about as well as an “acid hack” (more commonly known as a bark hack). Phrased another way, Mr. Johnson comprehends and comments. He says that working turpentine teaches one how to work hard and how to save money regardless of how little they make. He says that many turpentiners tried to save money to buy themselves some of life’s extra pleasures (cars, homes, land) and were successful. Others, Mr. Johnson says, spent the money faster than they made it.

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Mr. Johnson feels that the main reason turpentine is no longer around his part of the country anymore is because that there is no one young enough who knows how to work it properly. More significantly perhaps, the young generation nowadays wouldn’t work turpentine if it were around, he says. They are more

interested in drugs and stealing. If old men who knew all about turpentine could teach the younger generation, some of them may work it and perhaps it would make a comeback. Indeed, if Mr. Johnson wasn't so old, he would love to still be in the woods chipping boxes. He says that he would try today, even though old age has hindered his ability to maneuver as freely as he once was able.

388 Mr. Johnson says that he misses working in turpentine because he worked it for so long. If there were any turpentine around, he says, he would be in the woods still trying to work it. Mr. Johnson says that he hopes to work on some of the few remaining trees in the area still being used for the extraction of gum, those as Gillis Carter's house. He says that he would like to work on them in the near future.

The "Spirits" of Turpentine: A Conclusion (Remainder of interview)

411 Though many turpentiners recall how hard the work was at times, Mr. Johnson says that it never seemed very hard to him. He always tried to keep his hack in good shape and, he says, that was the key to making the work easy and enjoyable. In more words, the key is like with "most anything," he explains. "If a fellow take what he needs to do to learn how to take advantage of it. Don't let it take advantage of you. You take advantage of it, it ain't hard." Mr. Johnson states proudly that he has chipped 3200 trees in one day before. Most men only worked 1500-2000 a day.

438 Mr. Johnson says that only the turpentiners who didn't mind working miss turpentine today. "But now, it's done got to where ain't nothing in here but them young bucks, and they don't wanna do nothing," he says. "You know, they do wanna do no kind of work. But you take them on up in age, if they had somewhere they could, they would work some now."

453 Mr. Johnson says that he doesn't feel that white workers remember or reflect upon the turpentine industry any differently than the black workers. He does say that the white worker who had a crop of boxes and a good hand to work them likely enjoyed the work. Also, the black worker who was able to work with a partner in the woods enjoyed the work the same way. Partnered workers were able to drift apart in the woods, meet back up eventually, tell a few jokes, and split off from one another once again. Times like this bring back good memories for Wilburt Johnson. "But now, you take these young boys now... 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." Dope, crack, stealing, and other forms of crime account for this generation gap, Mr. Johnson insists. [Mr. Johnson's great grandson plays with a rake in the background]

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Mr. Johnson tells the fieldworker that if ever if he is in town again to interview other workers, he would love to go out to Gillis Carter's and chip a few trees to demonstrate how the work is done. [Fieldworker explains upcoming plans to videotape Mr. Carter working on his trees and invites Mr. Johnson to come along. Initial plans are made.]

[End of Interview]