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Tape Log: South Georgia Folk life Project

Tape: Fieldworkers Tape 1

Interviewee: Mr. major Phillips

Fieldworker: Le Roy Henderson

Date of Interview: January 25, 2004

Site: Home of Major Phillips

██████████ Old Savannah Rd. Hwy 86

Adrian, Georgia 31002

Summary description of Tape Quality:

There is very little background noise on this tape. Mr. Phillips' speech is at times difficult to understand, causing questions and answers to be repeated. He also appears to be mentally challenged in some way-slight-yet noticeable.

Summary Description of Tape Contents:

This interview is a description of the experiences of Mr. Major Phillips as a worker in the Turpentine Woods in the state of Georgia. Mr. Phillips is 58 years of age as of the date of this interview, and at times has difficulty putting his thoughts into words.

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0000...Introduction:

Mr. Major Phillips was born November 3, 1945 in Treutlen County Georgia. He is the last known turpentine woods worker in this area. He began working the woods with his father 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".

00237...His father worked the pine woods for over 40 years. Phillips states that working the woods was enjoyable, though he recalls a time when he dreamed of "entering the Air Force, and becoming a doctor, but a time passed I continued to work in the woods".

00342...First came chipping, then dipping, streaking, scrapping and raking pines. He recalls the camp community or quarters as consisting of blacks and whites which was unusual. The camps were generally black as the workers were black. Some houses had 3 rooms while others had 4. The houses furnished for the workers "were nice houses, not the best, but somewhere to live".

00603...On his first job he worked for the Kennedy family of Cobb Town, Georgia. This is a black family that operated its own farm, livestock and processing operation and turpentine camp. The owners name was Marston Kennedy. The Kennedy family still have large holding in Cobb Town today.

Phillips father moved the family to Cobb Town to run the turpentine operation for the Kennedy's and according to Phillips "the Kennedy's treated him and his father like brothers". *The Kennedy family is black.*

00847...From Cobb Town the Phillips family returned to Soperton and began work for the Claxton's. Major worked the farm growing tobacco and cotton as well as the pine woods. At the same time he and his family operated their own farm growing tobacco and cotton share cropped with the Claxton's. In 1959 the Phillips had a banner crop of cotton which "got them a brand new television", a first for his family.

01007...For Major working with black or whites "it was all the same because I never considered myself different from anyone else". Even as a child he had white friends and playmates. He states that he never had "feelings of racism".

01043...After leaving the Claxton's with his enhanced skills, Phillips went to work with his father on their own land in Gillis Springs, Georgia. They maintain that farm to this day. During the summer Phillips would work at the local sawmill in Swainsboro.

001252...When working the pine woods Major and his father would start work between 7am and 7:30 am ending at sundown. Raking the pines, scrapping and streaking, hanging tin, pulling the boxes and burning were common place. During the 1950's mules and wagons did the hauling from the woods as trucks could not maneuver the pathways. He states that "some black men were fortunate to get jobs as mule drivers, because the work was not as hard". Phillips recalls Mr. Claxton working side by side with the men in the woods, an unusual occurrence in the woods: an owner working with the woods workers. The pay at that time was three dollars per barrel of tar-"good money in those days".

001843...After taking off from pine woods work for a couple of years, Phillips returned in the 1970's, working for Mr. Eugene Phillips. He recalls this as a good job because the Phillips "would split everything 50-50 with the woods workers". They worked on the "halves system". Sometimes dipping tar would bring Major as much as \$300.00 per week. At this time he did not live in the quarters for workers but lived on the land "owned by his parents".

02202...Major went to work for the Gillis family in the 1980's as a woodsman and was paid by the "bag full". One year he dipped over 500 barrels and made over \$9,000.00. The commissary in those days had everything that the workers needed from food to clothes. He worked for the Gillis family for 20 years before stopping in August of 2001. When the Baxley gum processing still was shut down, that ended

the turpentine business in the area. Major saw many changes in the turpentine business over the years: streaking gave way to putting acid on the trees and paste was used to extract the gum. Tractors later replaced the trucks that had replaced the mules and wagons, while machines replaced many of the men who worked the woods.

02647...For the children living in the quarters, life consisted of farm work-even for those as young as 12 years. They also had time to “play marbles and ball”. School was attended in Gillis Springs and sometimes at local black churches at Oak park. Some children would walk as far as 3 miles to attend the one and two room shack schools. One of the schools was at Phillips Chapel church, the other was at Steele. Phillips recalls that while working for the Kennedy’s, he rode the school bus owned by Marston Kennedy to school.

03032...He describes life for the women of the quarter as one filled with farm work and domestics. For fun he states that they would “play cards and baseball”. On Friday’s people would come from all over-Adrian, Soperton-Vidalia and Swainsboro to have a good time. Rock and Roll was the order of the day. Men and women would drink and dance to the music played on drums, guitars and harps. They drank and gambled openly, but sometimes would go deep into the woods to enjoy themselves. The Juke Joints were in Swainsboro and Soperton. They were called “The Bottom Line because they were located in the bottoms”. Often goodtime houses were set up deep in the woods so no one would be bothered.

03535...Phillips says that as he looks back on his experiences “he cannot recall ever being mistreated, and even in the time of segregation, he openly and freely intermingled, even going so far as to sit down with whites to eat in segregated places”. His last Christmas in the woods he earned over \$1,000.00 with the help of one of his brothers, in just two weeks. Working alone he handled 5,000 trees. The Gillis family allowed him to work the woods for himself.

02647...He continues to work for the Gillis family today and is his own boss. He lives rent-free in a home on a hunting compound that belongs to a Gillis family member, and receives a check every week whether he works or not.