

Interview with Joseph Johns  
Part 1, 2-28-05  
Recorded by phone, with Laurie Sommers

1:56 start with question about mules and horses with your father working as driver. Did you ever use term “teamster?” for driver of wagon?

JJ No, he was just a driver.

LKS Three incidents with runaways?

3: 05 JJ I remember once we were pulling into a still; we were just fixing to offload the barrels of tar. The tar was always left where in an area where it could be tipped over and rolled up a ramp. And just as we pulled into the still there was an explosion in the still. Just frightened the horses and the mules. They ran away. My father and I were sittin’ up on the wagon. We were going just about as damn fast as possible down the road. And he was trying to tell me to pull the pin, right? And he’s pointing to the pin, but I didn’t know what he was talking about, and he was trying to hold the horses back. I finally figured it out, so I pulled the pin. He turned loose the reins, they went one way and we wound up upside down in the ditch.

LKS Was anybody hurt?

JJ 4.06 Oh yeah, we both got hurt pretty bad. Banged up you know. I remember I broke my shoulder collar bone, and he was all banged up. And we lay there, the guy came along in an old truck, picked us up and carried us back to the still. Then the other time—

LKS Did the company then pay for a doctor or anything?

JJ No, no, no. Never seen any doctor. None of us ever seen a doctor.

LKS Did somebody have knowledge how to set bones?

JJ Bones? Well, they re-set my arm, or tried to, it bothers me to this day. But, that was—they put me in a mud pack...Indians had a way of taking everything that was a broken bone and they pack your arm or your leg with mud and it would, it’d harden up, and it’s just like the stuff they use today, the plaster. ...My mother did that... {LKS people in general knew this, not a special healer?} Pretty much. If you had a broken leg you pulled on it, it would go back in the position, they would figure it was, and that would be it. They put the mud on you....

6:20 The other one was a wildcat. My father and I were loading the wagon. We used to take, there was two long stilts about 20-30 feet long, and we used to put those on the back of the wagon. And we roll these barrels up on the wagon and then tip em up, you see? Him and I was out rolling the barrels out on the wagon, and I heard something in the bushes over there, but I never paid it much attention. The wildcat over there, she had

some cubs over there. And she come out, and let me tell you, she was pissed off. WE were too close to her. The mules run away, we jumped up on the wagon, and after about a quarter mile we was able to pull the pin and let em go, and jumped off.

7:30 Then, there was the time that, some damn dogs got after us. They were wild dogs. They used to travel in packs, 5, 6, maybe 7 dogs in a pack. We were going t the still, we were about 10 miles from the still, I guess. We were going down this road, and dogs run out of the woods over there and started chasing, trying to bite the mules on the legs, and they run away that time. I was familiar wit the pin by then. I pulled the pin, my dad threw the lines away, and the wagon it went one way and we went the other.

LKS when you say wildcats, do you mean panthers?

JJ no they were not panthers...Georgia had some panthers in the Okefenokke, but right up there where we was at, around McCrae, ...we were out in the woods, nothing but woods out there. That's where we lived at, in the damn woods, he came out, the panther came out, out of the bushes, just snarling at us, ....I think it was wildcat, I'm not sure. It was a big cat. She was mad.

LKS Did your father have any particular techniques, things he used, with the mules? Did he care for the mules too or was he just the driver?

JJ 10:08 Just the driver. They was never cared for really. . Next morning we'd go downthere and hook em up and take off again.

LKS Do you remember any of the terms he used when driving em?

JJ [laughs] yes I do, but I don't know if you want to hear em! ....Oh my God, I've heard him cussing mules for everything in the world. The mules had a habit, OK, when they got hot they'd stop. And when they'd stop they'd just stand there until they'd cool off, and then they'd go. He had a lot of patience, but he he, he'd get mad at the mules. And they wouldn't budge. Hell, they'd stay there until they cooled off... He'd try to get them off in the shade somewhere. That was about the way it was. He'd call them mules every kind of son of a bitch there was in the world.

11: 57 Name of bossman? ...He was very seldom seen. [tries to thnk of name] He owned about three still,s 15-20 miles apart. ... I worked for the man all my life when I was a kid, and I probably seen him once or twice. He had a brother named Todd, he was doozy. He would ride around, never knew when Todd was going to show up, rode a big white horse, big shiney boots. Jodphur pants, he was ready..... Look up and there he'd be. Sometimes far back in the woods, dipping tar back there, pulling boxes, chipping...

11:11 LKS were you often supervised?

JJ No, never ever. ... You had to be independent. It was, like, I would have 250 trees, OK? After I knew the trees, I'd just automatically go to them trees, I had a path-like, not exactly a path, but you could see where I had been between the trees where I worked em.

LKS 15:04 You refer (in notes) to that you followed trails? Term you used?

JJ That would have been a new trail, the new trails that we had, what we'd do is break a twig and that way we'd never get lost. If you went off your given path we would usually just break a twig, you know, ever 2, 5 feet whatever, and that way we'd always find our way out of there.

LKS I've heard other people use the term 3-path ? But you use trail?

JJ well, that's Indian. Indians don't use the word path. Its always trail.

LKS 16:27 Is that something that any woodsman would do (breaking a twig) or is that more an Indian technique?

JJ No, its common knowledge. If you were white, black, whatever the hell you were. If you went into a new area, you had to know where you was going to get back out, so you just reach up and break a twig.

LKS Techniques to navigating through woods, swamp which were distinctive to the Creek people? Knowledge? Passed on by uncle, grandfather? Specialized knowledge because of your background? [oh yeah] Anything particular?

JJ The sun. The sun told me where I was at. If it was a cloudy day I was lost... My wife she would tell you, I have a sense of never getting lost.... I can navigate like that. I don't know how to explain it to you.

LKS Is that something you were taught by your elders? [yes} And other Indian people didn't have that same sense? [yes, and I didn't teach em}. Anything else that comes to mind?

JJ I don't know if the black people, how they did it. A lot of them were Geechees, you know what Geechees are?

LKS Yes.

JJ 19:17 You know you can hardly understand em. They would come from Alabama and SC and they'd work the woods out there during the turpentine season and then they'd take off. Lord knows where they would go. They were kinda like vagabonds. A lot of them from Alabama. They were high yellow.

LKS Geechee, you're referring to blacks from the coast? Sea Islands?

JJ yes, GA, and St. John's SC... I always got a kick out of Geechees because they were short and black as black can be. And talked so fast you couldn't understand. They had their own language, it was Gullah. .. They spoke Gullah. If they didn't want you to understand em, if they were standing around talking, and you walked up to em, they would start talking Gullah. And when you alked away they'd talk English, if they didn't want you to understand what they were talking about.

LKS 21:25 Working a certain time of year in the woods?

JJ Usually May to middle of September, they would take off. I don't know where they went. {special role in the woods?} They'd do anything in the world there was to do. [just a few?] There was usually 4 o5 families, and they would live over in that, I like to say colored quarters, but in GA they say 'nigger' quarters. That's where they'd live at. And they'd live in any damn house you'd give em. They didn't pay for nothing.

LKS You don't think it was taken out of their—

JJ 22:22 No. If you went to the commissary and bought a pair of overalls, probably cost you 1.98 cents or something like that, couple bucks anyway. It would then come out of--, fatback, matches, cooking lard, flours, sugar, salt, that's about all they had in there.

LKS You mention in your notes Cajuns? There were some working in the woods?

JJ Yes, I had an aunt that was Cajun. Came from out there on that pepper farm, Macklehaney (sp?). When I was at Peabody Musem, Mrs. Macklehanney, she was 100 and something hyears old, used to come to Peabody Museum, bought a collection of carvings from me. She knew my aunt's family when they lived on the pepper farm out there [where?] Its in Louisiana anyway.

LKS Was your aunt the only one?

JJ 24:32 She came up with a group of people, met my uncle up there and they got married (in GA).

LKS They came working as a crew, in turpentine?

JJ Yes. ...I'd work with em 4-5 monthes, they'd be gone, next year another crew. Sometimes the same ones'd come back. Usually they'd just move around picking vegetables, whatever kind of work they could get.

LKS Did they live in company housing?

JJ Yeah, they were shacks. This place we lived at where Bobby was born, place called English crossing. ...GA. {near any other town?} No, one store up on the road, near the highway. We lived in a house about a mile from the store, back in the woods, and the turp. Still was there. Lot of activity around there. Peole would come in from the woods.

They would go over to the quarters and live. Now the Cajuns didn't live over there. They wanted separate housing. They tried to stay around white people and Indians. They wouldn't stay with blacks.

LKS 26:44 Did they come as crew and stay by themselves as a crew, or would they mix with other folks?

JJ During the day, when they were working, they were friends. They spoke their own language. When we talked to them, they talked English. ...They worked with everybody. It was just a mixed crew.

LKS With blacks also?

JJ Yeah, you might run into a Cajun out there dipping tar, you might run into a Indian, any damn body who was out there.

LKS What was your sense about ..your family, a number worked in the woods? Was it common with other Indian families that you knew? How typical was it to find Indian people working in the woods?

JJ 28:16 At that point, it was just my father and myself. I was a youngster, I rode on the wagon with him, helped him with the wagon. When I got big enough I started my own trail, see, so I had probably 250-300 trees I worked. [You didn't know any other Indian families that worked in the woods?] Sure I did. [was that a common occupation} yes.. Tarheel was a damn tarheel. They all helped each other. On Sunday they had ballgames, you'd have black people, you'd have Indians out there, you might have a bunch of Cajuns out there. You have Geechees, they all played ball on Sunday. Was always a big ballgame on Sunday.

LKS with people at particular camp, particular bossman you were working for.

JJ Yes.

LKS Where was ballfield?

JJ usually over in the colored quarters. Big clearing out there. But it was always in the colored quarters.

LKS 30:09 Were most of Indian people also Creek or were there other groups represented?

JJ All Creeks. The Creek Indians got such a bad deal from the Cherokees that they didn't have too much to do with em. Cherokee came down and they didn't last too long. You know the history of the Creek Indian wars and the Cherokee?

LKS Something particular?

JJ Well, this could go on forever. Let's see, it started the time DeSoto came through the SE. When he encountered the Creek Indians on the Altamaha and Oconee River, they all lived on the river around Jacksonville, GA, right on the banks of the Okefenokee. Now when they, when he came down in there, all the men had, all the braves had kind of disappeared, they were watching em come into the camp. But they didn't hurt the people and try to mutilate the women and children, they were looking for the men, they wanted the men. Then they told em, Seminole, Seminole, and you know what Seminole means? [Runaway] That's right. ...They would point to the trail which led back into FL, where they had just come from. So they moved on. But then the conflict between the Creek Indians and the Cherokees, when DeSoto got up into N. Ga, they told him that the Creek men had went down into the Swamp, and they went back, but they still didn't catch em. They knew they were coming. But the Creek Indians never forgave them for telling them where they were at. .. That's a long story..[made short]...

33:37 JJ Bobby's got a book that I sent him amonth ago, got all the Creek history in it. If he'll lend you that book it'll tell you everhything you want to know about Creek Inidans.

34:12 LKS Your family story about Trail of Tears?

JJ As far as I know they stole horses and came back. That's about the only story I ever heard my grandfather mention to me.

LKS I talk about stories about the return.. Coming back from OK or escaped from the removal. {I told you they stole horses and came back from OK. They'd steal a horse, ride it till they dropped dead, and steal another one. All way through the SE until they got back home, and they stay there.]

LKS 34:35 Looking at your Altamaha sculpture, talks about the symbolism, about the two mirror heads of horses....Altamaha symbols used by Creek scouts, did you learn that from reading or passed down?

JJ Oh, my grandfather talked about it. ....That was carved many many years before I was born....

LKS I mention the man part Sioux I met who lives in Echols Co., worked turpentine. Met him at Agrirama turpentine still firing....

37:35 LKS tools made in winter, what tools did yoru father make?

JJ blacksmith who worked for the company, he made em.

LKS Repairing tools, did your father do that?

JJ You use a puller or a chipper, the handles used to come loose, and he'd fix em. I've re-handled, I've got a whole damn drawer full of tools that I've put together.

LKS someone told me you'd make the stocks of the hack to fit your hand. Particular wood used?

JJ Oak. Usually you'd cut a limb, just trim it down, after "hafting" is when you fix a blade into a handle. Once a blade has been hafted, it's ready to use. [blacksmith do hafting] No he made the blade and that's it. He gave it to you. Shape it, do whatever you wanted to with it.

LKS 39:47 Still was always a white man [yes] and he had more prestige {yes} but everyone else was pretty much equal.

JJ Dyals, that's the man's name who owned all that property in McRae...

LKS everyone was pretty much equal [yeah] Driving mule—[no, no big deal]. Nicknames, you mentioned yours? Do you remember any other nicknames in your crew? Just my brother Bobby, his nickname was Pone Jigs.

LKS 41:30 Payday?

JJ Payday was very simple. You got in line, walked up to the stiller, stiller used to pay us. And he gave you a paper sack with your money in it. [says after you were paid you went to commissary and paid your bill, there was a crap game, bootlegger, prostitutes]

JJ Yeah, there'd be some of them there.

LKS Black and white, Indian?

JJ Pretty much. They were dejected women. Some of them lived out there. They were divorced or their husbands went off and left em.

LKS After stuff was paid for at commissary, did your family have much left?

JJ No, hell no. Very little. My father used to make \$7 a week. That was it. [after bill was paid?] He used to get a paper sack wit \$7 in it, he'd go over to the commissary and pay whatever he owed over there, and that was it. He'd have 5, 6 dollars, which was a lot of money.

LKS 43:30 You talk about carving, finishing, recipe includes turpentine.

JJ Homemade turpentine, total different formula. [used for anything else} yes, medicinal... You take a 5 gal. bucket, you take some fat literd wood, you put it in it, you start a fire. Put the bucket down in there and covered it with dirt, and you just left it. Heat the coals, heart up the wood inside, and it would seep down, and it was a tarry, very thick syrupy substance. It was used for everything from broken ankles to carbuncles.

LKS Non Indians used turpentine for medicine as well, but this the same as what was tapped and processed at still.

JJ This was 100% different. I don't know if anybody used it other than Indians.

LKS turpentine on hat kept insects away [notes] that was turpentine fromwoods.

JJ Well you could take a handful of tar and rub it up on your old straw hat and it'd keep the bugs out. I got to end this conversation here....

LKS could I call you back another day?

JJ Sure, sure...

46:40 end conversation.