

Interview with Stetson Kennedy at his Home, Beluthahatchee, FL
June 19-06
Laurie K. Sommers, interviewer
Partial transcript, not edited

1.55 How did your work begin with forced labor, esp. turpentine?

SK: I don't remember, exposed to it as a child...collecting began pretty much with WPA FL Writers Project 1937. Before that my next door neighbor and Classmate Traverse Ewell, grandson of a Col. Anderson, an attorney in JAX who represented turpentine camp operators,... as a boy, seeing kept various hats, coats in office for different settings. One of stories told, FBI decided to go into a turp. Camp in FL to look for evidence of peonage. And Col. Anderson called the local sheriff in, and the sheriff locked him up for trespassing, thought this very funny that FBI locked up for trespassing. Time for jury, said, you picked my jury and rested my case...Said as an aside, turp. Operator charged with peonage found not guilty, foreman told Col. Anderson after the trial, we couldn't charge him with a thing like peonage just because he had to whip a few rascally niggers for running off without paying their debts. I thought that was a classic definition of how the system works.

5:22 Naval stores was a major industry in that period, JAX a major port of shipment of barrels of naval stores. Common site in my boyhood to see the JAX shipping yard full of barrels of naval stores for shipment. Also lumber mills and sugar cane grinding mills part of picture (local economy).

6:47 LKS What shaped approach you took when you went into WPA and doing this collecting

SK Born in 1916, and started for writers project in 1937.. collecting of oral history, folklore, and ethnic studies. I had 3 caps. Staff statewide of about 200 people. My interest in things like that came about much sooner, before I went to UF in early '30s. I remember driving past the Duval Co. Prison Farm, called the Blue Jay, 2 black women harnessed like mules to plow, and 3rd black woman handling the plow. Went back later trying to get a photo of human harness but failed. Exposed to things like that at a very tender age, so turpentine just one of those things, nothing all that special about it.

8:55 My grandmother would come down from Statesboro, GA, and we had a pine grove surrounding our home in JAX, really in the wilderness at that time. And she would wander around the pine grove looking for a tree that had been scraped and was exiting rosin, and she would take a ball of rosin and suck on it for her rheumatism. Mother would keep a large bottle of turpentine on back porch, any cut poured turpentine on the wound. We would run off howling but it never got infected. That was my first aid all during my childhood.

9:55 LKS were they working those trees?

SK not those, but turpentine all around. In the beginning cups tended to be ceramic. Then triangular aluminum or tin to catch the rosin. "It was everywhere to be seen."

11:08 Let me tell you a bit more about the circumstances surrounding the United Nations. Not sure how much of this is in print. '52, I was here in Beluthahatchee. Picked up Florida Times Union, saw UN commission on Forced Labor convening in US. But stopping because no witnesses of any forced labor anywhere in Western Hemisphere. Sent telegram officering to bring forced laborers. Telegrammed back that committee already ended, but offered to hear him as expert witness in Geneva if he could come. Had wire recorder, was living in the middle of Jones turpentine operation...so I raced around getting tape recordings both in turpentine camps and in potato and cabbage fields in Hastings and Sparks, FL, just down the road. So those were the sources of the wire recordings that I took to Geneva.

13:43 Story of that whole thing, had no money, hitchhiked to Miami. Two black preachers, activists, one AME and one Baptist, when to them with this opportunity. ...Raised enough money to get me to Washington. In Washington some Labor Union contacts got me to NY. And similar contacts in NY bought me a one way ticket to Geneva with \$8 to spare. Had made reservation by telephone but didn't have money to confirm it. Just before that was to expire, I got a call in my hotel room, a mystery voice, I assume was CIA, too bad you missed your flight. But just a few minutes before had got just enough \$ to confirm the ticket. When landed in Geneva, a few CIA standing around giving me the once over. Didn't have an overcoat, friend in NY gave me his overcoat, so I arrived in Geneva with this oversized overcoat. CIA couldn't help laughing

16:19 Testifying took place in a room in the Palais de Nacion in Geneva where League of Nation used to meet. Tremendous chamber...Communicate by microphone. Committee sat at one end, I sat by myself at another end. Chairman was from India...I submitted a transcript as well as tape recordings. Chairman said, Mr. Kennedy, are you not of the opinion that employers are entitled to some sort of protection for advances of credit, lodging, and food? I said something to effect, not to point of floggings or being chained to bed, arrested, forced to work on chain gangs. In my opinion people forced into that type of slavery through economic pressures, no better than the other type of slavery. Eleanor Roosevelt had been US REP to UN at that time, outspoken as to right of individuals to address UN. After my testimony, America reversed position, opposed individuals not allowed to testify without being sponsored by one of organizations.

LKS 19:30 Was turpentine amongst the worst or the worst in terms of this type of abuse?

SK What we're talking about is commissary system, successor to chattel, referred to as debt slavery, commissaries referred to as robberssaries. Workers charged 2 or 3 times the market price of the materials....System cornerstone to agricultural, rural society which prevailed throughout South.

LKS 21:00 Did you observe anything about turpentine that was different?

SK Least common denominator of flogging or other forms of physical abuse, chained to bed at night, stayed on job or went to chain gang, pretty characteristic of system, not unique to turpentine.

LKS Why was such a large portion of your examples drawn from turpentine?

SK Lot of things going on labeled unjust, not just peonage, and I was equally opposed to all of them. Could be said that turpentine worker was stationary, pretty much,.. Cross City worker said he'd been born in turpentine. I said why don't you get out of it? He said onliest way to get out is do die out. If you tries to get out they'll kill you, and they got folks to bury you out in those woods...

LKS 23:40 Forced labor testimony drawn from WPA up to that time, examples from Moniac, Cordele, but you didn't go up into S. GA to gather materials specifically for UN? I wrote down locations mentioned in your various writing, some of the examples are from S.GA.

SK I don't recall now the sources.

LKS But when you had to pull together those transcripts?

SK Immediate area, here in St. John's County entirely, Jones Creek, Hastings and Spuds, drown SR 13.

LKS Back to WPA, you wore those 3 hats (FK, Oral history, and ethnic history) Say at Cross City, doing the recordings, can you recall your thinking of mandate as what to collect? Interrelated or ?

SK 26:30 Very difficult for academician to draw the lines. All three things at once. Able to gain entrée, with Zora Neal Hurston ahead of us, by saying we were purely interested in folksongs, and on that basis we were admitted to campgrounds.

LKS I had read that. What I hadn't seen was how particular camps were collected? Did Zora do that?

SK I don't know except it was a very large operation. Aycock and Lindsey....Many camp settlements in residence. Who made choice selection I don't recall, Don't think I knew at time. {LKS Zora goes ahead} She didn't discover it, if that's what you mean. It was an assignment.

LKS 28:27 Fred Cubberly papers about peonage, some 15 years before you ended up at Cross City, and one of the most notorious bosses was at that Cross City camp, so I've always wondered—

SK We didn't even know that.

LKS Glad I asked you, because I assumed with your background you must have known that.

SK Owner, husband quite young...

LKS Couple other camps you visited and collected at, all of those locations were assigned, or were you free to go out, and if you found something, you were free to gain entrée. Like "The Man", the white foreman, that was at Bay Lake, I think, FL.

SK That complete script should be in the records somewhere in Gainesville. Not one of my interviews, I don't think. Your other questions, we were all on the lookout, it was target of opportunity, some of both, assigned and other.

LKS Was Cross City the only camp you visited in the WPA?

SK Me personally? I have the feeling I went through many of them, because they were everywhere.

LKS so you tell the owners you are doing folksong—

SK Tells about nocturnal session at campfire [this story is written elsewhere]
Here comes the man, sing something quick.

LKS You were able to do that without any white supervision, because a number of recordings were made in office of Aycock and Lindsey

SK 32:00 My narrative interviews were not done in presence of any white supervisors....

LKS You had to clear everything with operators?

SK Things about commissary and chain gangs not done in presence of whites, no.

LKS 33:19 Do you remember how you were able to do that?

SK Able?

LKS yeah. You weren't accompanied all the time, like in Cross City, they let you be off by yourself.

SK Yes.

LKS You recorded some things at that campfire, and some in office.

SK I'd frankly forgotten about office sessions.

LKS Assuming there were whites present, what would be your assessment of the material?

SK You wouldn't get any. It would be like that woman who delivered her thesis to the GA State S. Labor Archives, some 15 years ago, she said there must have been some ethos to keep them there at turpentine all their lives, and it made me angry and I said ethos consisted of a bull whip.

LKS Did you actually see whippings when you were doing?

SK No I saw where the whippings had been, scars... You talking just turpentine, whipping was commonplace... my father's retail furniture store in JAX [tells about seeing a young black man taking ladies dresses and ran, caught, heard him screaming for an hour in justice of the peace office]

SK 36:45 Up until the time of my testimony question of forced labor was a favorite subject of propaganda in Cold War for both East and West, after my testimony didn't hear much more about it from either side. In my monograph made point, In America victims by accident of birth into race, class, ethnic group as opposed to being accused of any sort of crime. Traveling to Russia, some member of Soviet Academy of Sciences said I was best known in Soviet academic circles by the monograph. Couldn't believe so much of my data drawn from govt. documents.

LKS 38:46 Cross City, how did you come to interview particular people you did?

SK Don't recall. To some extent Zora been there a week or 10 days before we were, she had a list of names. And that was part of it. Knowing Zora I would say for sure that she selected them for a repertoire of songs, not for talking about commissary.

LKS Quite a bit about superstitions, mojos, you get a little bit, some stories

SK if you look at TOC of FL Negro MS, each chapter, one about superstitions, one about spirituals, all things white folks figure colored folks of interest, because of hoodoo, witch doctors, rest of black life pretty much ignored or glossed over.

LKS Were you constrained by that script, that you had to ask those kinds of questions, because you did ask other things..

SK We didn't have any questionnaires, as director of these things I urged fieldworkers not to use questionnaires, follow conversation, react to what they were saying, developing a rapport

LKS 41:19 So you didn't field like things people had come to associate with black folk, you felt free to collect whatever you wanted to collect.

SK That's what I'm saying. FL Guide, we were assigned different areas. I was one of 2 editors of essays. I volunteered to write the contemporary scene essay. When it was done made copies of it, convened the editorial staff, and one of my colleagues raised his hand and said, Aren't we going to have anything in contemporary scene except niggers lynching and sharecroppers and peonage, Jim Crow, Klan, so that's by way of answering your questions that's where I was coming from. So we put in more magnolias and palm trees.

LKS 43:01 What about what you wrote that Zora wasn't interested in protest material. How did that affect what you actually got.

SK Names, nothing more. Except cryptic note. I think she mailed that in.

43:55 I think I've written to best of my recollection Zora turned in very little black protest lore. I thought it very curious that Zora's blacks never lynched even though FL on a par with MS in weekly/monthly lynching. Are you familiar with her MS she titled Art and Such and the moaning school of black lit? ...Very important to what you're doing..

end of Side A 45:00

* entire interview not yet transcribed