

Turpentine

Alton Carter and Elliott West, 2-1-98, recorded on West's front porch, Folkston, GA.
Int. by Laurie Sommers

(sounds of cars on nearby road)

West b. in McIntosh Co. Born Aug. 27, 1920. 430 Okefenokee Dr. Box 850, Folkston, 31537. No phone.

2:31 I started with my daddy, scraping the trees. That's still turpentine. But I didn't chip until later on. '36 til I started chipping a little bit. I've been dipping and chipping all along, and pulling. Right on and on. (2:55) ...

quarters
3:00 I was in a camp quarters. We had a quarters. (Carter-^Fthey called 'em turpentine quarters then just like a housing project today. The turpentine people built several little houses, quarters, for their workers to live in.)]

3:22 Sendick (?) is where I first started. That's in Brantley Co. (Carter: Today it's Waynesville.) It's on the other side of Waynesville...

4:13 We stayed there a long time. Stayed there twice. The first time I was too young to work in the turpentine. In 1928 daddy was turpentine. I was small. Later on we moved back home, and then we moved back to Sendick, and that's when I started turpentine.

4:40. Living in the quarters with my daddy, but I was going to school. Back in the 20s.

5:03 Just going to school in the church. The church they had for a schoolhouse. Teacher a lady called Ethel Kirby. She just was a schoolteacher. She didn't work for the man I worked for.

5:40 Quarters "Just houses built out of rough lumber and tin tops. Some of them had a chimney. We lived right at the railroad. *AH+C RR.*

6:19 Carter: [Back then most people just called them turpentine shanties. (It wasn't like it is now). No electric light, none of that. Old iron bed, sphagnum moss or old corn shuck mattress...There would be several hundred people, kids and all in turpentiners quarters.

hackworkers
7:09 They had a few whites was turpentine, but it wasn't many. Biggest one was black.

7:19 [There wasn't too many white people actually doing the work.] What [the white people was doing the work, most was farmers that would supplement income ~~that was~~ doing their own.] You had some white people working for other people, but the white people. There'd be the colored quarters there and right over there'd be the white quarters.

8:18 We went back in '35 and then I started turpentine.

8:40 some men would camp and go back to town every few weeks to their family. My daddy had my momma and me with him, we didn't camp. Mother died long about '31, so my daddy moved back in 35.

9:11 I learned by helping my daddy. Got out on my own in 38 or 37, chipping. Just left altogether. my own man.

9:38 Food in the commissary? "just straight back, tomatoes, canned goods. We didn't have nothing fresh. (Carter: dry beans, rice and tomatoes. Lima beans, We called it sourback.) Bacon was in big pieces. Lard, they had it in a lard can.

10:20 Eat in your own house. Had a kitchen, wood stove and fireplace in the front room.

10:41 Carter: Turpentine quarters was a little different from sawmill quarters. Usual thing, turpentine people went more for family people than just single people. Your sawmills back then, they had what they called a boarding house that cooked for everybody, a lot of single men. Turpentine quarters, I never knew of a boarding house being in one. If anybody boarded there it would be with a family that was there.

11:27 Eating in the woods--West. "Well, I carried bread myself. I'm a bread man. Didn't hardly carry no rice or boiled food at all. I still do that when I'm working. Nothing boiled. I'm scared it would get sour.

12:18 Tallying

13:42 West "I wasn't no tin tacker myself. I was in the crew, but I always would blaze or chip boxes behind. If they was putting virgin I'd be blazing the face down."

corner streak, tacking it down, hanging new cups. Discusses old and new ways of tacking.

17:47

This is the time of year, the winter months, when you put the virgin out. What we call cropping out. You go out there and give each man however many boxes. You ^{put} putting your first streak on. You put your corner streak when you put it up. Then you start streaking long about the 15th of March. That's the old rules on it. Then you chip em regular then on until the fall of the year. October is usually the last of chipping. (18:36)

counter starts over at 000

And then they go to scraping it out and elevating the cups--that's raising it up. Higher up on the tree (23)

old/new chipping Ethel paste used on trees. ^{19:11} "The old method you chipped every week, you cut the wood. Now, with the new method, your acid and paste, you just want to skin the bark off, you don't want to catch any more wood than you can help, spray it about every other week with the acid, but the paste, you can go three or four weeks, usually 4 weeks. (1:06) It stimulates the pores in the tree and ^{produce} creates more gum. It takes three or four of the old method of cutting the wood.] .30.

Dipping--every month you cut. The old wood method, every four weeks, four streaks, would fill your cup. The new method, two with your acid and one with your paste. (1:55)

You dip it and carry it to the plant to be processed there. In the fall of the year, as you go along each month, a certain amount as you chip it up higher, an amount of your gum

catches on the face of the tree. It's what we call the scrape. They don't pay as much for it. You try to get as much of it off as you can in the fall of the year. In the winter months is when you scrape that off, you see. (2:36)

West scraped for his daddy in 1935.

West's first wage. 70 cent a thousand.

Carter: during the Depression it dropped to 35. ..They paid a little more for chipping than they did pulling. Before you started.

West--raking I didn't get but 20 cent a hundred. (Carter, used to burn woods. Took a garden hoe, weeded straw and grass, 3 feet around tree, to keep it from burning). When quit working, he worked for half of what the barrel of turpentine was worth. Got 70 dollars/barrel.

5:37 Carter: Blue whistlers. If you made your own timber and carried it to the still yourself, you got \$4 a barrel, that was what they called a blue whistler. (?) Standard barrel \$140, 435 pounds.

6:50 West: work in woods. Way back yonder, had boxes adjoining, saw people all the time. Now it's patchy. We used to work timber adjoining, people would call each other, and keep going.

8:50 Sometimes I've worked boxes and haven't seen nobody in the run of a day, nobody.

9:52 I have blazed out faces, and pulled down tin, take the tin off the tree when you're going to elevate it. (how many man), Sometimes, two or three, sometimes 4 or 5, sometimes nobody but you.

10:45 (when did quarters end?) In the 70s? In the last 15 years. West lived quarters in Florida the last time. Carter last ones he had 1972. "I had about 20 families there." At one time I had more than anybody else. Some lived here in town....Last quarters around here any more was Lloyd Powell in Homerville. And Mr. Gillis'. Last quarters in GA about 10 years. *31-40*

What would you do on a Sat. night? (to West)

13:20 I drunk an awful lot of whiskey, I'll tell you that. *3200* Get out on the street in a weekend. [They had a place in the quarters we had fun.] Didn't go into town to much. Carter: [they had a place they could get together, drink, play poker and stuff. They called em "jooks" [They had these victrola machines.] Sunday nights we could sit on the porch, and the black people, the turpentine quarters, they could make some of the best music on a washboard or a tub, or a tambourine. [You could hear them playing for 4 miles on a good still summer night. Moonshine. I used to like to sit on the porch and listen] when I was a kid.

West: [they had people that had guitars and things when I was coming up.] I remember when the piccolo came out (a jukebox??) That's later years. [Guitars and banjos was all we had, a few of them had a piano. Most of them guitars.] ..Would buy whiskey. Bootleggers.

17:00 gatherings at end of season?

Not clean enough wood?

Carter: I never knew of anything like that. A lot of turpentine quarters, the 4th of July would give a fish fry. West: they finally cut that out. Big places used to be fish fry, BBQ, the boss man would furnish it free. A lot of places didn't do that. you could take the 4th, but there wouldn't be no BBQ.

Days off:

Boss man would just give us that BBQ, we'd take off, and go back to work the next day. We don't work Sundays. Sometimes we knock Friday dinner. I'm about the only one worked Sat. much.

What time would the work day start for you?

19:54 West: Monday morning till Saturday. If I'm going to work I'd get up at 4:00 in the morning. I'd cook for myself and be ready to go to work. (Carter: If you'd come at 6:00 he'd be ready). Not many people do that, get up and cook like I do.

21:42 Carter: Quarters, they'd fight with pullers, hacks. That moonshine, they'd call it block and tackle. Take a drink, walk a block, and tackle anything.

23:24 Carter: tacking-- the old way (describes process). A tacker, a fast one, would put nails in his mouth.

Gum in s. GA:

42.55
2. [24:25 You got a pine tree ⁱⁿ northeast FL and SE GA, your timber grows faster. } And your weather got a lot to do with that. } And all your turpentine in the US is a better grade, a superior gum, a stronger gum, than your foreign gum....The foreign gum is a lower grade than ours.

Turpentine stills:

[25:43 The one in Baxley is the only one operating in the United States today. Only producing in the SE corner of GA right now. South used to be big turpentine producers. Dwindled down in last 25 years to this area. This plant is Baxley be the onlyest one operating the last eight or ten years. (26:40)

Jack Tilden was the last one in FL. Down in Burnell (?) Florida. (West: I worked for his daddy.)

27:27 End of Oct. is usually the end of your chipping season. The gum don't run well in the winter. ..the winter months, after you got through scraping, you'd start elevating the tree for the next season. Elevating your timber and putting your cup close to where your streak's going to be. Do that in your off season to keep something going all the time.

Tree used for about 4 years. then you get out of reach for pulling it. Cuts your grade of gum when it gets so high, so much scrape there.

48.05
18
22.00 [**29:35 what you dip is gum. Your turpentine what you distill out of that gum that the tree produce. That's the liquid. then your other produce is rosin. You get your turpentine and rosin out of gum. } People call it turpentine, which it is, but actually the first stage is gum. After it's processed it's rosin and turpentine. (30:09)

A crop of trees. What we call a crop is 10,000. [When Elliott was a younger man, say 15 years ago, he could work a crop, chip it and dip em. For the simple reason he worked 6 days a week, early and late.

add new
*

31:11 West: I have chipped 10,000 in a week. A week and a piece. But I was a younger man. Carter: right now, the pace of an average man, 800 a day. [About a 100 an hour is a good day's work. Today. But the old method of chipping and pulling, a thousand or 1500 a day.]

.05

Now you use your paste, it's a little awkward, a little different. The old method, you didn't do nothing but walk up there, he didn't hardly stop. It's hard to explain unless you're in the woods.

Car 5...
AL
12

Source of timber: (train in background)

Rented it. These turpentine people lease timber from the farmers, given em so much a cup. They usually leased it for 5 years. The farmers that didn't work their own. A lot of turpentine people had land they bought up themselves. Like your Langdales over in Valdosta, them and the Barnes', biggest turpentine people there was, the Gillis'.

Them old timey turpentine people, they picked (land) up for 5, 10 cents/acre. Now it's 1000/acre or 2 or 3,000. Back then, you could get timber land for 25/cent acre.

(I ask if West had a nickname--just Elliot West.)

remedies with turpentine:

35:10

Carter: Cuts, or something like that. A bee sting, you put it on. Then you use it, some people got sores or boils. West: I have a cut myself, I take some gum, in the woods, scratch till it bleeds and put gum on it and keep going. Carter: Most of the time it never gets sore, fresh cut, just take the soreness out of it, and it'll heal. (35:50)

Carter: Kids growing up, use it every morning before breakfast, in the winter, they'd put so many drops on a spoonful of sugar and give it to a kid. Every kid had to get some turpentine and sugar before breakfast. They'd keep you healthy.

West: I remember it'd be good for worm, too, worm'd be in your stomach. People didn't take medicine in the time I was coming up like they do now.

Carter: Back then people doctored with camphor, astro----, and turpentine. (castor oil) Even the stock. They kept turpentine and tallow mixed up together to put on -- people get sores. Pure tallow for chapped lips. Poultice: they used turpentine and tallow or tallow and tar. They would run the tar out of a pine wood, of light'hd wood. Doctor the livestock with cuts with those.

38:00 reasons for decline of turpentine.

Foreign market. Get a lot of by-products, the same thing, from pulp mills. Trees that they chip up and distill. The new methods that they got there. Then the labor. It's harder to get labor. Price, can't get it up there where people can make the right kind of money. The newer methods of producing turpentine just slower getting around to it. To produce it cheaper. [Now you can use a plastic bag or a bottle and drill a hole in the tree, produce pretty good gum and less labor. The foreign market came in so cheap and

plastic bag
or bottle
?

processors got word of buying it. They don't try to market our gum like they do the foreign gum. They substitute it. (39:45)

58:21
44
Got so much modern equipment doing the other work. Like pulpwood, got the machinery, saws and push saws, wages got so high to operate this machine, they took the work out of it. Nobody wanted to do the work. Turpentine's a skill, everybody can't turpentine. There's an art to it just like anything. Some people can chip and pull, some people can chip that can't pull. It's just an art to anything you go at. A good chipper's a professional man in my book. See, another thing, everybody don't know how to keep the tools sharp. The sharper the tool the easier the job of turpentine, And the more gum it produce. See, people don't realize that. A sharp tool'll make more gum. (dull tool will tear at pores of trees, close them) If its a good sharp hack or puller it just slides like this. (gives analogy of cutting your finger) 42:30

sharpening tools: cutter and file. I have tools right in my pocket.

43:15 A good turpentine worker'll keep his tools sharp.

Good chipper: 44:35: (on West's work) You can stop there and look. Every face is smooth all the way from the ground up. He worked them from beginning to end. It's some of the best work. And that was my lease from the state.

46:40 West hasn't worked since week before Christmas. Carter: not over 10% being worked here that was 2 years ago. State's got a forestry man down here, he's trying to cut it off. (discusses problems with timber industry, cutting without a lease, canceling turpentine leases)

Carter: wants a tariff on foreign gum. GA forestry commission after W.W.II to Australia and Argentina. Showed them slash pine techniques. Set up competition with us. Then showed them how to turpentine. Discusses new bag technology being developed. Quick, easy, and cheap.

53:00 Not many people that will go out there and work. Taylors--family of black people that have got boxes working, but they're not going to have any boxes to work.

53:40 verbal permission for use by Elliott West

54:00 end of tape

2-1-98 Field Notes

I turned on my tape recorder after explaining my project, and both Carter and West talked, but Carter dominated, perhaps because he is a good talker and perhaps because he is the boss and white. He was dressed for church in a suit, shirt and tie. West had a plaid shirt, jeans, and work boots. He appeared to be quite poor. Has not been married for quite a while, lives alone. We sat on the porch the whole time, and there were traffic sounds and trains in the background. There is no pension for turpentine workers. Carter told me in the car about a black man named Cecil who worked for him--he died in Nov. but was a talley chanter Carter had planned to introduce me to. He evidently called himself "mr. Carter's nigger" or some such. Carter told him he'd pay for his funeral and get he and his wife a headstone, which he did. Although the days of the commissary and quarters are over, in which turpentine operated basically on a sharecropping type of system, there is still an element of paternalism in Alton Carter. He believes in taking care of his people, treating them well, but not fraternizing.

Both Carter and Elliott would have been more comfortable showing me how to do things in the woods rather than talking about them. I also am not particularly well read on turpentering at this point. I did manage to get some material for the radio show, although I'm not sure how usable the sound quality will be with the background noise. We spoke of my coming back in a month or two when the weather is warmer and going out in the woods with them.

Carter is a wealth of information. We had supper at the Huddle House afterward and I questioned him some, filling out my artist data sheet. He mentioned that he cut the first pulpwood in Charlton Co. in 1938. He remembers his daddy turpentering in the Little Okefenokee, using log rollways to get the gum out of the swamp. Need to talk to him more about this with tape on. He did his first dipping at age 10, and although he has worked for himself all his life, he has also done pretty much all the jobs a turpenter can do. Born at Racepond (named for the horse races the soldiers had around the pond during the Indian wars) to John Carter and Emma Dyals Carter, one of 10 children.

Feb. 24, 1998
Henry Rutland and Paul Massey
Thomasville, GA

Met at Mr. Rutland's home where I had arranged to record him playing music for the radio series. At his request, his guitarist--Paul Massey of Boston--came to back him up. I had asked Rutland to play some of the older tunes in his repertoire on his great-grandfather's fiddle. He really doesn't play it much. The fiddle has a longer neck than his regular fiddle, and Rutland had a little trouble playing it. The fiddle has two significant cracks on the top which have been repaired, and a distinctive curly maple back. It is softer in sound than his regular fiddle, which is used to cut through crowds and project over PA systems, but it did not strike me as overly soft. The two older tunes he chose were standards: Golden Slippers and Soldier's Joy, tunes he learned from his father (who taught them to Henry's Uncle Bob--aka Georgia Slim Rutland). Henry plays 5-6 variations on many of his tunes. The most interesting tune was a local one I believe--Albany Reel, which he had to teach (chord changes) to Paul. He said he only knew a couple other old fiddlers who played it. I asked about waltzes and Rutland said as a bluegrass fiddler he isn't called to play waltzes much. He started in on Westphalia Waltz and then broke a string. He finished off the selections on his greatgrandfather's fiddle again rather than change the string.

Paul Massey heads a timber crew. He brought his son Brian (age 8 or 9) because he wanted him to hear the older tunes. He commented that few younger people knew or were