L. D. Davis: 'Boss Had The Pencil'

L.D. Davis is one turpentine laborer who managed to make his way out of the web of work camps which cover the Southeast. He did spend two decades in the woods and turpentine quarters of Hoboken, but he has lived the last decade in his own small, wood home a dozen miles northwest, off a rural highway near Blackshear. What turpentining Davis does now is under a system called "halfing" — he does all the work (chipping and dipping) on trees owned by a farmer in the area, and they split the proceeds. At 56, Davis likes to explain how he now is his own man. He is an affable person, whose speech frequently is punctuated by rumbling laughter. His conversation is often interrupted by the crowing of a rooster which walks freely outside the house, past by a battered old pickup. An edge of grey hair shows from under Davis's red cap. He sits in his living room, portraits of Martin Luther King Jr., Coretta Scott King and Robert Kennedy inset in a clock behind him. On a counter at his side are a collection of gleaming athletic trophies won, he says with a note of pride, by his teen-aged, football-playing son. Outside in the dirt street, a muscular young man in sweat pants and shirt lopes smoothly toward the house, picking up the pace for the final sprint home.

* * *

"I left in September of '66," Davis said in a recent interview. "I do a little turpentine even now, self-employed. I ain't retired yet. Still piddlin' around.

"I lived right in the quarters there. I went in the woods, they called my job chippin' boxes. Cut on them pine trees, just skin 'em, let the turpentine run off 'em. Skin them down with a little thing called a bark hack, cut that bark off and spill some acid on it. Make that turpentine come out. Yes sir, tap come straight out into a cup. Then they have another crew that come dip it out of the cup, a two-quart cup which hangs on the tree, square bottom cup. Then they take it to a still, a plant they called it.

"We got paid by the barrel, so much a barrel. About six dollar there at the end, nothin' much, I can tell you. We got paid by the month. It would run about 30 barrels, 35 sometimes. It was no regular thing, you know, it was up and down. "Light bill, he (the boss) would take that out. Water bill, he paid that. We just worked. A lot of time you wouldn't end up with much, you gotta borrow some. (Davis pauses for a big laugh). You have a little ol' white slip, we used to call it a white horse. It showed how much you traded and how much you borrowed and everything, with your light bill and electric bill and all this added on to it. And sometimes there'd be a balance due, you'd be owing him.

"So you had to borrow some. Instead of getting paid, you'd get a white horse, we called it. What you'd be borrowin' would be on there next month. There wasn't no way to save, wasn't no way in the world, oh God.

"Fellow who ran that place then, Frank Dukes, he wasn't no mean fellow. He was a pretty good guy. I worked for him 19 years. He was all right, you know.

"Some of the fellows I worked with is still there now, working for this other fellow, Junior Sears. 'bout the same there, I guess. Still doing the same kind of work I was. I think he may be givin' them a little more on the barrel.

"I kept track of what I did, but my figuring wasn't nothin'. The boss had the pencil, and I just worked it. Sometimes I guessed all you was gettin' was paper-work, you know, but I put up with it till I got out of there, 19 years.

"Most of the time when a worker tried to move, there still was an account. It be just like me buying a hog, you know. They'd go to like another turpentine man, doin' the same kind of work. He'd pay your man what you owed. Then you'd be sold to him.

"You didn't work no hours. You just worked. I went 12, 13, 13, 11 hours, all of that. From the time I got up till I was done. It wasn't hard. It's just like any other job you get used to.

"If you was sick, they'd take you to the doctor. The boss would take you. Then he would give you some castor oil or something.

"We had five or six head when I was in there. My two oldest boys worked a little. They was working in teams, did a little tar work, worked for the same man.

"They had a little store there, called it the commissary, you know. You could go get you a little groceries, your beans and peas and red hots. If you had some money you could go up to Waycross, but most of the time you didn't.

"They ain't doin' as much of this type of work now. A lot of people just quittin' workin' like that for nothin', they just went to huntin' other jobs, when they get a little older, they learn a little sense and quit workin' like that.

"I finally decide I just maybe get on my own, you know. Be my own boss, get me a little ol' place. I didn't have to pay nothin' to get out. I finally broke even after so long. I had been crammin' a little somethin' for the last couple of years. I wasn't savin' nothing, but I could order somethin' beside a loaf of bread.

"I just got tired.

"I'm doin' a little of it now, you know, but I'm workin' for myself. I work 50-50. If I get two barrels, I'll get one, give him one.

"Way back, I just started workin' on it. I just like it. That's the reason I do a little of it now. I like that kind of work. And the way I'm workin' now, I'm my own boss, see. Nobody tell me nothin'.

Left the turpentine camps, L. D. Davis of Blackshear.