

# Naval Stores Ages-Old, but Few Like Living in Past

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When English explorers first surveyed the shores of North America, they found wild game in abundance, rivers teeming with fish, a temperate climate and — everywhere they looked — pine trees. A report to Sir Walter Raleigh in 1586 told excitedly of the trees, which might yield "pitch, tar, rosin and turpentine."

"There are those kinds of trees which yield them in great store," the report said.

In colonial times, there were few substances as important as the products made from the gum of pine trees — they were used to caulk and maintain the fragile wooden sailing ships which carried men and goods from port to port.

Because of their maritime uses, the products were called "naval stores."

With vast pine forests, the American colonies had the natural resources to produce naval stores. And after the importation of slaves began in 1619, the colonies also had the abundant cheap labor needed to collect gum from the trees.

Nearly 400 years later, pine tree gum still is being collected in the pine woods of a handful of Southeastern states. Georgia is the chief producer.

The "naval stores" now are used as ingredients in scores of products from paint thinner and wood stains to medicated soaps and liquid floor wax, crayons and flypaper.

The uses of the gum have changed. But to a remarkable degree, the naval stores or turpentine industry has not changed. Centuries after its founding in the colonies, the industry still is virtually totally dependent on hand labor. The laborers, almost all of them still black, work for pay often far below current standards.

One government forestry publication estimated that in 1971, approximately

5,800 people in Georgia worked producing naval stores. The report matter-of-factly totaled the workers' annual wages at \$7 million — about \$1,200 a person.

Largely because working conditions have changed too little, the turpentine industry now faces an uncertain future. Production has dropped off in the last decade, but not because of reduced demand for the products. Industry officials, producers and the workers themselves agree the problem is labor — finding a new generation of workers to do the job and live a life of the past.

South Georgia turpentine producers have been known to say that their products were used in the construction of Noah's ark. That claim is hard to prove, but historical records do trace the extraction of gum or oleoresin from pine trees back to at least the ancient Egyptians, who used pine tar to make a preservative enamel applied to mummies.

Before the birth of Christ, shipbuilders along the banks of the Mediterranean burned pine trees to extract tar, which they used to seal the hulls of primitive sailing vessels.

The British Parliament, aware of the forests in the New World, passed a "Naval Stores Act" in 1705 to subsidize production of naval stores in the colonies. The British thus hoped to make their empire more self-sufficient by ending a long dependence on Scandinavia for supplies of the pine tree products essential to a powerful navy.

Naval stores were produced at first by "tar burning" — the cooking of pine fragments in a kiln. Later, a superior product was obtained by chipping into a live long-leaved or slash pine and collecting the gum which flowed from the wound. As the gum would flow only in hot, humid weather, turpentine quickly settled in the southern colonies, primarily in North Carolina.

During a journey through the deep South in 1853, writer Eugene L. Schwaab noticed a bustling industry hidden in the Cape Fear region of North Carolina, then the source of most of the nation's yearly output of 619,000 barrels of naval stores.

Schwaab wrote of "a dark wilderness of pines. So dense . . . it seemed as if we had entered a realm of sighing and moaning. . . . All was solitude."

"But, as we progressed, we soon discovered that man had left his 'footprints' even here. These immense pine forests had been allotted into 'plantations,' which are devoted exclusively to the production of tar and turpentine. Here and there by the wayside appeared a small cabin, or factory, where the turpentine, put up in barrels, is collected."

Schwaab noticed the scarred faces of the trees where workers had dug "boxes" for the gum to collect. He continued: "The somber appearance which is given to the country by its extensive pine forests is by no means cheered by the tar kilns which meet the eye here and there as you pass, and which resemble burning volcanoes on a small scale . . . surrounded by an unearthly set of black figures in human shape, thrusting long pikes into the agonizing structure."

"In this branch of industry, slave labor is made very profitable, much more so than in cultivating the soil, poor as it generally is in North Carolina," Schwaab wrote.

The journalist and historian Frederick Law Olmsted, perhaps the most diligent recorder of the look of the South in the 1850s, also toured Carolina turpentine lands where "the road was a mere opening through a forest of long-leaved pines."

"Every tree, on one, two or three sides, was scarified for turpentine. In 10 miles, I passed half a dozen cabins, one or two small clearings, in which corn had been planted, and one turpentine distillery, with a dozen sheds and cabins clustered about it."

While similar forests spread through

other Southern states, Olmsted wrote that the inferiority of cotton planting in North Carolina meant Negroes were "in rather less demand; and their owners oftener see their profit in employing them in turpentine orchards than in the cotton fields."

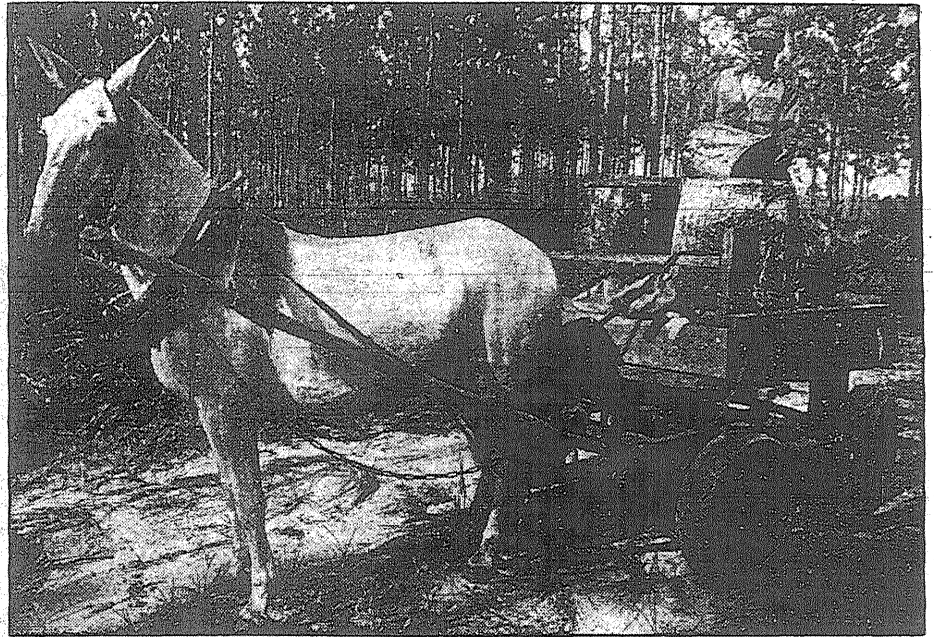
Olmsted found the white turpentine farmers of "a grade superior" to the "great mass of white people inhabiting the turpentine forest, most of whom were 'entirely uneducated, poverty-stricken vagabonds.'"

The turpentine farmers' property consisted "mainly of slaves," but these blacks had far more intimate contact with their masters than Negroes in other slave industries, such as cotton. Accordingly, Olmsted found the turpentine slaves "unusually intelligent and cheerful."

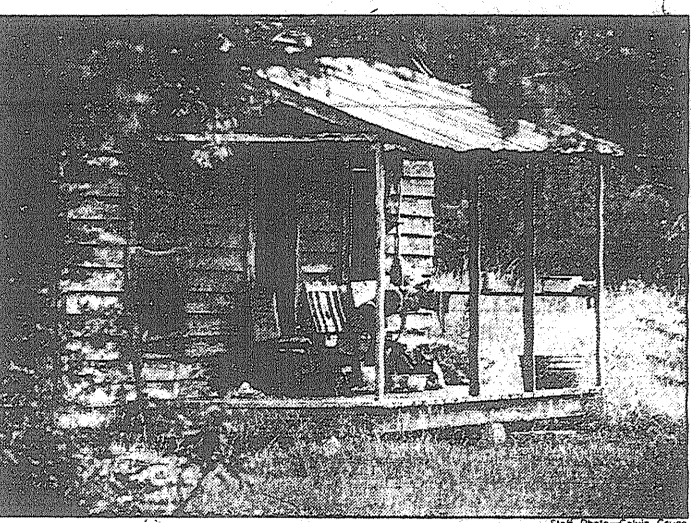
A prominent Southern soil chemist, Edmund Ruffin, observed that slaves set many fires to the pine forests in North Carolina because they disliked turpentine. Ruffin thought the labor easy, and

attributed the arson to the relatively solitary nature of the work. "A Negro cannot abide being alone," Ruffin said.

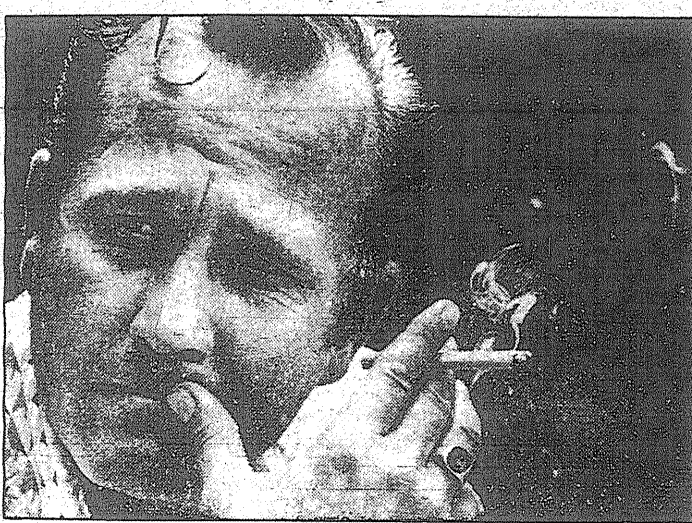
Despite such purported displeasure of the slaves, the southern United States by the mid-19th century was accounting for more than half the world's production of naval stores. The products, both crude and distilled, were a major export from the region.



Turpentine Sammy Lee Pritchett loads a full bucket of gum into the barrel



Faded shacks called the 'quarters' are home for the 15 workers



The workers look to the boss, Junior Sears, for most of their needs



Sammy Lee Pritchett handles barrel of gum

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carrying supplies slung over their shoulders.

Several of the men set out directly into the pine forest, others walk slowly to the stable not far from their own wooden shacks. At the stable, five mules learn quickly that for them too, a weekend's rest is over. The mules are hitched to four simple wooden carts, and the carts are driven into the woods. There, for the next five days, the carts carry the heavy barrels of gum from the tall, thin pines.

Both the mules and the men are following a routine established over generations, and part of the routine is that Monday is a slow day. Leading the mules into the woods kills part of the morning, and the men move carefully, as some are recovering from a weekend of drinking. Sometimes a turpentine man will not even emerge from his shack Monday. No one will force him out, not even Artis Lee Gaskins, commonly called "Rev," the portly, energetic black man who serves as foreman of the turpentine camp.

Twelve men are at work here this Monday. Lee May and Clifford Giles ride into the pines on a cart drawn by two mules. There is plenty of gum in the area of the woods they will work; the cups attached to the trees are quite full. But it is not an easy day. The brush and briars are thick, and in places the trees are far apart. The men have to carry heavy metal buckets into which they scoop the gum as far as 40 yards to get from one tree to another. It is hot, with the temperature in the mid-90s, and humid.

Giles, a muscular 6-footer of 42 with short hair cut almost to the scalp, works with the power and agility of a football halfback. A deep metal bucket at his side, he quickly makes his way from tree to tree, deftly using a "dipping iron" to scoop the gum from the cups attached to each one. When his bucket is full, he empties it into one of the barrels on the mule cart. Then he returns to the trees.

Between the gum and the sweat which pours off his body, Giles' trousers soon stick to his legs like a second layer of skin.

At 11 a.m., the men take a short break. Clifford Giles rolls a cigarette and drinks some water, which he carries in two old glass bottles. The sounds of the woods are in the background; a slight breeze blowing through the pines, an occasional bird, and, at this moment, the grinding of logging machines in the distance.

Giles could probably get lumbering work and earn more money. But he doesn't want such a structured job, he says. In turpentine, the men are on their own most of the time, except for an occasional visit from Rev, who rides on a horse through the woods. "I can work like I wanna," Giles says simply of his life's work.

Though the heat and the humidity do not ease in the afternoon, Giles manages to fill two barrels by the end of the day. His newcomer-partner fills one barrel. "We're going to a better place tomorrow," Giles promises.

Tuesday, however, is not better. Not only is it steamy-hot again, but horseflies and mosquitos are out in force. And the newcomer finds a tick in his hair.

"Get plenty of them," Giles says, "but ain't never got one in my hair."

There are hazards worse than ticks facing the turpentine men. Some days the men work in swamp

water above their ankles, and Giles has had to kill some rattlesnakes in his time.

The work tools themselves can be dangerous. By a shed in the woods, Giles comes across an old, discarded work shirt. He can guess what kind of worker used it. "See them holes?" he says, pointing to a number of dime-sized spaces in the faded garment. "That shirt belongs to a puller. Look at them holes."

"Pullers" or "chippers" are the workers who go from tree to tree scraping off a row of bark with a long metal tool. The wound forces the gum to run down the pine trunk. To aid the process, the puller sprays a solution of sulfuric acid on the bare tree face. The use of acid is one of the few innovations in turpentine in this century, but sometimes the acid blows or sprays at the worker — thus the holes in the shirt, and the marks on some of the workers' faces.

Giles takes good care of his own work tool, his dipping iron. This afternoon, despite the heat, he builds a fire and holds the iron over the flame until all the accumulated gum burns off. He shows similar care for the mules and cart given to him for his work, feeding the animals and checking over the cart at the end of each day.

The stifling summer weather Tuesday makes dipping exhausting. A gurgling occasionally comes from the dippers' rubber work gloves, the sound of accumulated sweat that has run down their arms.

Still, the dipping is productive. The trees are closer together than Monday, the brush not as thick and the gum freely flowing. By late afternoon, the mule cart carries four full barrels, three the work of Giles, one the newcomer's.

The mules and carts stay out in the woods weekday evenings, locked in a corral covered by a tin roof. As the carts are not available for transportation and from the quarters on these days, Rev drives a pickup truck to meet the men at several clearings on the outskirts of the woods.

Early in the morning, about 6 a.m., Rev drives the pickup from shack to shack, collecting men again for another day among the trees.

Charles Pope does not make the trip Monday or Tuesday. On Wednesday, the day Pope has said he would leave, his small wood frame shack is still occupied, but he again does not appear when the foreman's truck pulls in front with a curt beep of the horn.

"He ain't goin' agin today," says one of the men crowded on the back of the truck.

"Yeah, he jus' don' wanna work," mutters another.

Like their boss, Junior Sears, most of the veteran turpentiners see Pope as one of a breed of youngsters less and less willing to do hard work. Clifford Giles has disdainfully observed that Pope gets "them free stamps," meaning food stamps. Also, unlike most of the others, Pope sometimes complains about white people making all the money from the turpentine.

The industry has suffered in recent years, in large part because of the difficulty of keeping younger workers like Pope. Both the older, veteran workers and the turpentine bosses agree that many of the younger men simply seem to prefer welfare, or life in the cities.

In one sense, some of the other turpentiners suggest that Pope is lucky to be getting out. A new

worker is warned several times by veterans that he should be careful not to get into debt to the turpentine boss. Extending credit is part of the life, and workers tell of struggling for years to get back even. They tell of colleagues having to sneak out in the middle of the night to get away.

Jim Palmer, in his 70s, one of the oldest men in the quarters, tells of a turpentine boss an hour away whose laborers always stay in debt. "I won't trust a man who won't let you pay back," he says.

"There's two kinds of white men," Palmer says, sitting back in a chair in his shack and gesturing to his side. "There's one who will give you this pee pot and there's one who will take this pee pot away from you." Junior Sears, who runs this place, is one of the good ones, Palmer indicates.

If a new worker shows up at a turpentine camp, he must be asked about his debt. When a newcomer inquires about work here, one of the first questions asked by Rev is, "Do you owe anything?"

The industry practice, workers say, is for the new boss to pay off a worker's debt to the old boss. Then the worker starts his new job in debt.

Charles Pope had been one of the first workers to warn Lee May to stay clear of this system. "You ain't gonna make nothin' here," he said. "Get the hell out."

Now Pope seems to be following his own advice. He has told the others he plans to head to another south Georgia community, Homerville, and work in a saw mill.

Actually, it almost happens that none of the other men work Wednesday. It is gloomy and threatening to rain, and turpentine stops when it rains. Rev, the gung-ho foreman, is 15 minutes late getting to the quarters in the morning, apparently having waited for the latest weather report.

"See any rain, Rev?" someone asks when the truck finally arrives about 6:15 a.m.

"I don't believe so," Rev says, although it is drizzling at the moment. He means they will try to work.

Canvas is draped over the heads of the men in the open back of Rev's pickup, but it does not cover the back foot or two of the truck, and several of the men are exposed. Among these are two of the older workers, "Uncle Charlie," and "Charlie Peg Leg." Uncle Charlie, almost 75, is a onetime railroad man who works here as a puller. He is almost never seen without his favorite white hard hat, and now, in the rain, he takes out some clear plastic and puts it over himself, too. Charlie Peg Leg, sitting next to him, is a grizzled character in his 60s whose artificial leg does not prevent him from working in the woods. He rides on the truck with that leg sticking out over the back.

Several pairs of hands try to contain the flapping canvas, but the rain sprays over the men as the truck rocks along at about 60 mph. Yet, the motley truckload of men does not draw stares on the roads around Hoboken. Turpentine men are as much a part of the landscape as the small post office, the grocery store and the large turpentine still which line one side of the tiny town's main street.

There seems to be a fondness for the turpentine men. White men who pass in automobiles while the laborers are gathered by the side of the road or in Rev's pickup often will give a standard south Georgia greeting, an index finger slowly raised



Drinking is a common weekend pastime for many of the workers

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