

# 'Junior' Sears: A Man Born To Turpentine



Oscar 'Junior' Sears, 38, Was Born Into The Turpentine Industry

Like the men who work for him gathering gum from the pine trees around Hoboken, Oscar "Junior" Sears was born into the turpentine industry. He noted with some pride that his daddy, as a turpentine boss, "raised" some of the current laborers. For more than a decade, Sears leased turpentine rights to 80,000 trees around Hoboken from C.S. Varn, one of the area's most prominent landholders. At 38, Sears is a man of medium height with thinning red-blond hair and a build that is now tending toward the portly. The father of three children, Sears lives on the northwest side of Waycross in a pine-shaded, middle-class neighborhood full of comfortable ranch-style houses and two-car garages. On a recent afternoon, Sears sat on the steps of his colonnaded front porch, lit a cigarette and talked about his years in the business.

"My daddy was a farmer first, but he used to work for other people. Mr. Alex Townley, he started off working for him just as a boss man. They had a big farm, I imagine they had about a thousand acres that they farmed. Daddy seen after that and he seen after the turpentine. When Mr. Townley got killed, then daddy bought half of his place up in Homer-ville.

"I believe I started to helpin' daddy when I was 16. My job was to see that they done their work. That was my job. I used to go out dippin' in the evenings. I

brought up in it. It ain't too bad a job once you get out there and get workin'. A lot of it is getting out there. You gotta get tough to do it, but you gotta get tough before you can do anything.

"The man that used to own this place down there where I'm at in Hoboken, he got killed. That was Mr. Frank Dukes. He was huntin' or something, I understand. I been down there about 12 years now.

"Now, last year, I'd have to look back to make sure, but it seems like last year we made about 1,200 or 1,300 barrels. That's a bad year. Now, we really haven't had good seasons for the last three or four years. Really, the only reason I stay with it, I reckon, is because I like those fellas that work for me. You know, two or three of them my daddy raised. They was on his place. But it's going down. It wouldn't surprise me if in about another three years it won't probably be over with.

"We haven't got but 10 or 11 men, I reckon, workin'. I can remember here a few years ago, I worked as high as 40 or 50 men myself. One time me and my brother worked, I imagine both of us worked about 300,000 trees. There were a lot of people back then worked more than that.

"Now, you might say, I just can't get no help. That's what I was telling you this morning. I had to keep cuttin' down,

the kind of labor I had. Your younger people, they just don't want to do that type of work, I reckon is one thing.

"Now, if they work — you know how they work. Most of mine knock off about 2 or 3 o'clock. You know, some of them dip two or three barrels a day. Sammy, I believe he dipped about 15 to 17 last week. It seemed Clifford dipped about 13. Now those other two dippers they can dip, but they knock off earlier than Clifford. About 1 or 2 o'clock every day.

"I've worked white people, too. I've worked a lot of white people. I worked white people a year or two back.

"What hurts you in the type of business we're in is really during the winter. There are five or six months you don't make anything, and I imagine it's difficult to operate any business where you only have income for seven months out of the year.

"One time about four or five years ago, the price jumped up to about what it is now. One time it jumped up there for a short time, I think it was bringing, well, some of them told me it was bringing a hundred dollars a barrel. The highest I ever got was \$98 a barrel. It run like that for about six months to a year, and it dropped back down to \$50 a barrel. About \$78 is what I'm getting now.

"I've had hardships all through the years. We've always had labor problems.

I don't have any machines. They've tried to come up with different things, gas-operated chippers. They've tried all kinds of things, but they just didn't work out. And they've rigged up little carts to go out into the woods, you know, but that didn't seem to work out. I don't think.

"Really, if I could keep it going, I would have to go out and build me some houses for those laborers to start. And if I had my own land and houses, and wouldn't have to pay a lease on that — I think you can lease timber from the state for about 22 cents or 23 cents (an acre).

"There's lots of expenses. As high as gas is and everything, by the time you pay your Social Security and all the other taxes. Everything just gets so high.

"I make a living — don't get me wrong.

"I bought a farm a few years ago, and I sold it. That's one reason I could come up with my house here.

"I've always worked hard myself. I was raised up hard, and I've always farmed. It's just kinda what you get used to, in my opinion.

"I'd like to stay in it. You know, like I say, I been in it all my life. You know when you been in somethin' all your life and you just change off, everything's new to you."

## Turpentine

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turpentine still — a conglomeration of large metal vats used to distill the gum from the trees here and around neighboring communities.

Along the other side of the road are two service stations, the white people's houses and a church. Behind them, hidden from the main street, is a cluster of faded, ramshackle dark-red clapboard shacks, a tin-roofed outhouse behind each one. These are the turpentine quarters.

Clifford Giles lives in the shacks along with 15 other black men and their families. Early this morning — the sun not yet risen — a truck has driven through the quarters, a beep coming from the horn as it stops in front of each of the shacks. One at a time, the men emerge from the structures. A few of them are young men, but most are men in their middle years, veteran turpentiners.

They are shadowy figures in the dawn's fog, wearing caps and carrying feed sacks over their shoulders — the sacks contain personal supplies and lunch — and jugs of water in their hands. One by one, they crowd onto the back of the truck for the ride to the edge of the woods. There they pick up the mule carts which will carry them further into the woods for the day's work.

By late morning on this late July day, the temperature has crept above 90 and Clifford Giles has changed from high rubber boots to a pair of old combat-style boots. The boots have holes cut in the sides to let the swamp water flow out. His clothing is heavy, laden with sweat and spotted with gum. He wears gloves and holds in his right hand a "dipping iron," a metal blade which he uses to remove the thick, sticky gum collecting in metal cups attached to the trees.

Nearby there is a rustling noise. One of the mules is moving forward a few feet to munch on some weeds, at the same time swishing its tail to drive away the flies. Giles walks slowly to the mule cart, lugging a full bucket at his side. By the end of this day, the cart will carry two large barrels of gum he has collected, each barrel weighing more than 400 pounds.

For his work this day, Giles earns \$16. To earn that, he had left his shack before 6:30 in the morning and was in the woods by 7 a.m. He worked steadily in the hot, swampy environment, taking one break, at noon. He is an honest worker. When he notices some water mixed with the gum, he carefully pours it out. About 4 p.m., he climbs into the mule cart for the ride out of the woods. Then he feeds the animals and settles them for the night. After the truck ride back to the quarters, it is past 5 p.m.

Clifford Giles does not try to figure the number of hours he works. He thinks only in terms of the number of barrels he has dipped, knowing he will be paid \$8 for each barrel. He knows also that at the end of the week the boss will make appropriate deductions from his total — for water and electricity, for monies advanced, perhaps, or for other services rendered.

Giles does not worry about the total. "The boss adds it up," he says.

A powerful man, and one clearly not afraid of hard labor, Giles could get other jobs. But this is the work he knows. He likes it. And, here at least, the boss man is a good man. Still, leaning against the mule cart after completing his second barrel, smoking a hand-rolled cigarette, Giles is exhausted. And looking out over the section of woods where he knows he will work next, Giles comments to no one in particular: "Tomorrow be hell.

"There ain't much gum in them trees," he says. "Tomorrow gon' be a scuffle."

Among the turpentine workers with Clifford Giles in the woods of Hoboken this summer was Lee May, an Atlanta Constitution editorial writer. May obtained a job as a woods laborer as part of an extensive examination of the turpentine industry by the Constitution. He worked under his real name — his full name, Eddie Lee May — but his boss and fellow workers remained unaware he was a writer until after he left the job. Then they were told, interviewed and photographed.

Over a six-month period, reporters interviewed dozens of present and former turpentine laborers, bosses, government officials and scientists who have spent decades in the industry.

The picture that emerged was of a way of life from America's distant past,

of workers and their bosses both tied to the land (or, more precisely, to the pine forests) and following patterns of life handed down through generations. There were, of course, intermittent reminders of modernity: a color television in a worker's shack, a photograph of Martin Luther King Jr., and here and there an automobile pulled up in front of a shack.

The turpentine industry has experienced numerous ups and downs over the decade, and the way of life in the turpentine camps faces an uncertain future. Although the industry has survived in the woods of the Southeast since about 1600, producers and workers alike report that the new generations are hesitant to do this work — it is too hard and pays too little.

In fact, it is easy to make the case that the turpentine industry is a prime illustration of the largely ignored American problem of underpaid labor — workers doing society's hardest jobs while often making wages below the minimum set by federal law.

The men who run turpentine businesses and those who help regulate the industry agreed that woods work is hard labor. "It's a nasty, dirty job. I don't know of any other way to describe it," said Cash Harper, assistant director of the Georgia Forestry Commission.

But the turpentine bosses and industry officials also claim that workers in the industry do make the minimum wage, now \$2.90 an hour. "If a laborer will go out and work, he can make \$300 a week," said Ralph Clements of the U.S. Forest Service, one of the nation's foremost experts on turpentine. Clements and others maintained that if workers earned small amounts, it was because they are unmotivated, lazy or given to drunkenness — characteristics which one top industry official described as "the nature of the black."

Testing these industry claims was part of May's assignment. Although in good enough physical condition to run 30 miles a week, he was nearly forced to quit after his first day in the woods — it was the hardest work he had ever attempted.

May himself was to earn less than \$1 an hour for his work. As a novice, his performance cannot be used to measure an entire industry. There were, however, May discovered, some veteran workers who did little better. And the turpentine camps are full of men like Clifford Giles, who in many ways embodies an old-fashioned American work ethic but who often earns less than \$100 for a long hard week, and that before deductions.

As for the laborers themselves, they complain about immediate work conditions in a manner that is not entirely different from workers in a big-city office. At the same time, there is little talk abroad in the turpentine camp, or in the woods, about the system under which the gum harvesters work. There is an occasional bitter comment, or a worker who complains. For the most part, however, this remains, simply, the way of life they know.

Lee May, the newcomer to Hoboken, does not get a turpentine job in a conventional manner — through a newspaper advertisement, employment office or anything so formal. He takes the first step at a local service station. A red pickup truck rolls into the station, a turpentine barrel sitting in back. The newcomer asks the driver of the truck — a stout, bald black man of about 60 — if the barrel is a sign he knows about turpentine work in the area.

"You're right about that, 'cause that's all I've done all my life," the driver says.

He says his name is the Rev. Artis Lee Gaskins. He is known simply as "Rev." He is foreman of the woods crew in the town, and he needs help.

"We need somebody out there who can pull," Rev says. "Can you do the work?"

"Yeah," says the newcomer.

Rev scribbles the newcomer's name on a piece of paper along with the telephone number of the home nearby where the newcomer has rented a room. Rev says he will consult with Junior Sears, the white man running the turpentine operation at the moment.

Before he leaves, Rev has one more question. "Do you owe anything?" he asks.

It is a question that must be asked of any wandering turpentine laborer. As one retired worker explained it: "Anytime you work for a turpentine man, you can wind up in debt. If you want to leave him and go work for another man, that

other man has to pay him off for you. The new man, he'd call up the old boss and say, 'I got one of your men here.'"

The newcomer answers Rev's question simply. "A little." Could they help him out?

"Well, yeah, once you make the move," Rev says.

A few hours later, the call comes from Oscar Sears Jr., "Junior" Sears, Rev's boss. Sears says all the regular shacks in the quarters are filled right now, but he might be able to use a man willing to work.

Soon after, Rev calls. The newcomer is to be ready to report early the next morning, Thursday.

Hoboken is quiet and pleasant at 6:15 a.m., still half dark, a touch of fog hanging like spun glass in the air, and cool. Three men already sit in the back of the same red pickup Rev drove into the service station the day before. Rev has been up several hours this morning, driving once through the quarters with a beep at each shack to wake the workers.

He drives slowly over the dirt roads again to pick up the other men. Several of the dark-red shacks are set as close as 30-40 feet apart; others are as much as 50 yards apart. Interspersed are several collapsed or burned frames of old shacks, now uninhabitable. By 6:30 a.m., the truck has completed its rounds and 16 men have climbed aboard, two in the cab with Rev, the rest squeezed into the open truck bed.

A few minutes later, the truck clatters up to the first drop point in the woods. Several men jump to the ground. The truck moves on to another drop point, a small clearing off the dirt road. There, three mules gaze sleepily from a barbed-wire corral and a rough tin-roofed shed. Nearby are two small wooden carts. Beside them are perhaps a dozen barrels, encrusted with many layers of gum. There also is a small wooden shed containing food for the mules and work tools for the men.

Rev takes a metal tool and hands it to the new worker. "Now, let's see how you can pull," the field chief says.

The new worker does not know how to "pull."

When, at their first meeting, Rev had said: "I need a man who can pull," the newcomer had thought that meant merely a man who would work hard. But he had checked and found that "pulling" was a name he had not heard before for one of the jobs in the woods.

The newcomer knew the basic jobs were "chipping," making the initial wound in the trees, scraping off the bark; and "dipping," scooping out the gum. "Pulling," he learned, is a form of chipping — scraping off strips of bark, but higher up on the tree, using a somewhat different tool.

The problem is that pulling, like chipping, cannot be done without some skill and considerable practice. And it is obvious from the new worker's feeble scrapes against a nearby staghorn pine that he does not have the technique.

Perhaps sensing the problem, one of the younger workers in the group comes over, takes the tool, and quickly demonstrates several effective pulls at the tree. But Rev has seen enough. "I thought you told me you could do this?" he says.

"It's been a long time, man," the newcomer says.

"Well, maybe you can dip," Rev says, a tinge of skepticism in his voice.

So the newcomer is sent off with one of the dippers, Clifford Giles. Giles hitchhikes two of the mules to one of the wagons, shouts "Get up, red mule!" and they head off into the woods. They ride in the mule cart for more than 20 minutes before reaching the swampy section of woods in which they will dip today.

Giles is a large man, about 6 feet tall, muscular, with salt-and-pepper hair cut almost to the scalp. He says he is 42 years old and has done this work most of the last 24. He says he was born in Fort Myers, Fla., but started turpentine near Tifton. He is married and the father of five.

Giles is glad to demonstrate his technique for the new man. He works with assurance, using the metal dipping iron to scoop the heavy gum from the cups



The 'Rev' Supervises Turpentine Workers At Hoboken Farm

attached to the tall, thin pine trees. The bucket into which he transfers the gum has one flat side, so it can be supported against a man's leg.

The heaviness of the bucket as it fills contributes to the grueling nature of the work; that, combined with the heat as

the bucket is carried from tree to tree.

This is relatively solitary work. Chippers and pullers go off to assigned sections of woods to prepare the trees. Dippers work alone or in pairs. With 80,000

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## Jim Palmer: He Recalls Bad Days In The Woods

Jim Palmer, who variously gives his age as 75, 77, and 78, spends his days now sitting in the sun on his sagging front porch in the turpentine quarters of Hoboken. He is, 60 years or more after his first day in the woods, retired. Palmer is a jocular sort — he talks with the full-speed-ahead confidence of a born storyteller and, if there is a woman present, with thinly veiled references to amorous possibilities. By his own count, he has been married seven times and has sired at least 20 "head," or children. A son works for Junior Sears, the turpentine boss. Palmer has bright, inquisitive eyes, a stubble of gray whiskers and hands as gnarled and leathery as a tree trunk. \*\*\*

"When I was 13 years old, I began working in the turpentine business," said Palmer in an interview recently. "I turpented five years and then I quit — I got tired of that thing. I didn't like it. First thing about it, I couldn't learn like I thought I ought to learn. Out of five years, I learned to chip and I learned to scrape trees and I learned to pull, but I couldn't do ne'r one of 'em to suit me. I always been the kind of colored person that didn't like nobody to beat me when I was working. I wanted to be champ'n."

"Turpentine started around here about 1876. My daddy started to work turpentine, that's the reason I worked it, because my daddy worked it. When I got old enough, he put my butt out there. First thing I ever done in turpentine was dip. I had a dip bucket there, man, 'bout the size of that pee pot. And, shoot, I don't know where to tote it. I have that thing on my head, sometime, on my shoulder sometime, on my side. I fell down one day and that tar damn near drowned me. It got everywhere on me but right in my eyelids. I had me a time with that tar."

"My brother, he learned to chip. He was older than me. I got a brother; he ain't dead unless he died lately. I got a brother, soon to be 91.

"I could dip 10 barrels a day. And you

know what they was payin'? Fifty cents. They was payin' 50 cents a barrel. We worked in a squad. Seventeen in a squad. Chippin' 17,000 boxes.

"The bosses treated you mean back then. If you didn't do it, you wouldn't get nothin', and if you did do it, you'd only get half of what you did. They used to beat 'em, used to kill 'em, they used to do everything to colored. I was on a job once in Blue Creek, Florida. Ain't no timber there now. Well, the 'sketers was so bad, people jus' wouldn't work, and 'cause the people wouldn't take the 'sketers, the man would go to the house and beat 'em up, jump on their wives, wouldn't allow them to come back. If the nigger leave, they'd go and catch him, kill him and all kinds of things. This was when I was 19. I was a man then.

"When I was 16 or 17 years old, it was dangerous for Negroes to walk that thing (he points in the direction of the road) because the goddamn crackers run over yo' butt. Only thing out there in that road was a green spot or a black spot or a bloody spot. That's all you'd find.

"There weren't no police then. When turpentine started, that dog there was the damn police. When I started turpentine, there wasn't even a road patrol, there weren't nothing but what I told you. They had detectives and United States marshals. They been here, ever since I been here.

"I been in turpentine camps right here in Georgia where I been in water this high (he reaches down and touches a spot on his thigh) and worked through ice this thick (he spreads two fingers an inch apart), and I been in woods where boss man ridin' on a horse come up an' see a man sittin' down and ride up and kill 'im.

"One boss (in Florida) killed 22 for not workin'. Nobody done nothin'.

"There's two kind of white men. There's one who will give you his pee pot and there's one who will take this pee pot away from you."



Jim Palmer Rests On His Porch At 'The Quarters'

Staff Photo—Calvin Cruce