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FROM CANT TO CANT': THE NORTH FLORIDA TURPENTINE CAMP, 1900-1950

by ROBERT N. LAURIAULT

THE dark slides like a tight glove over the solitary woods camp, and no man's light affronts the majesty of the night sky. An insipid stirring of the warm evening air sets a single pine bough to swaying. Overall, stillness reigns—silence but for the monotony of a distant chuck-wills-widow and the earnest chant of frogs from some distant bog beyond the gloomy line of slash pines—the trees that make of the camp an island in a shadowy, evergreen sea.

And so in a shared flash of tortured dreams the summer night passes as the camp grabs these moments of respite between the blind-bright, sweat-grinding days. It is four o'clock, and the heavy air is rent by the woodsrider's cast-iron bell. The ten thousand and first day has begun.

The women are first to rise, grumbling and muttering beneath their breath at the morning damp. A building crescendo of their exhortations bidding the younger men to relinquish their moss mattresses is heard down the row of wooden shanties. The older couples are already about their business in unspoken acquiescence to the day's inevitable demands.

The wood stove is lit, and the scent of burning lighter pervades the shack. Lard is spooned into an iron skillet, and coffee is put on to boil while on the other side of the single partition the man forces his body into gum-stiff overalls and heavy leather shoes. The worn, broad-brimmed hat is last, and his outfit is complete.

A hoe cake sizzles in the pan alongside a measured slab of white bacon. The woman cracks two eggs, compliments of a squad of anemic hens already scratching in the dust beneath the raised house. The man eats quickly. He hears the shouted commands of the driver of the two mules as the wagon rolls heavily

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down the camp street picking up the hands on the run. The woman hurriedly stuffs cornbread, a sweet potato, and a mason jar of pot licker from last evening's greens into a cloth lunch sack. With brief words of affection she watches as her man, still shedding the webs of sleep, lunges into the morning dark toward the sound of snorting mules, creaking wagon, and aborted phrases of acknowledgment. An old man, thirty years in "turpentine," lets roll a resonant laugh. Day breaks as the mules pull the dippers toward the first man's drift. The woodsrider is "studyin' " on his six crops— 60,000 boxes on 60,000 trees.

Surely such a scene was repeated innumerable times across the great belt of pine forest from North Carolina to Texas through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But it was on the coastal plains of Georgia, Florida, and the other Gulf states that the turpentine industry with its attendant methods of labor control lasted the longest. There also it attained the form which assured its place in the dismal history of labor exploitation.

The camp was the still; it was the company store known always as the commissary; it was the manager's home; but most essentially it was the quarters— the home, be it permanent or temporary, of those whose lives were inextricably bound to their work in the way of the tenant farmer, the lumberman, and the miner. Whatever else the turpentiners did besides work was done within the precinct of work— in sight of the tall pines they bled for a living, beneath the roofs of the company shanties, under the sharp eye of the woodsrider who held a control over their lives difficult to imagine outside of slavery.

But such generalities hold true only for the earlier period of this study. As one advances through time, exceptions become numerous— especially for certain geographical areas. In fact, there exist two pairs of discrepancies: the first is that between the period prior to World War II and the post-war era. The second contrast is found between the camps west of the Suwannee River (plus the northern tier of counties) and those to the east of the river.' Accordingly, two camps will be examined, each representative of these two extremes— and, as will be seen, a third camp, as well.

1. Labor conditions in central and south Florida camps were as bad as anywhere. This article does not treat the camps in those parts of the state.

For the first period a camp (within a cluster of camps) located in Dixie County, Florida, owned and operated by the Putnam Lumber Company of Wisconsin, was selected for study. Ample information is available about this camp as a result of a federal investigation of peonage in the state. The camp was redolent of conditions widely reported in other camps of the area in the pre-World War II era. A camp in St. Johns County near St. Augustine has been selected as representative of the post-World War II period.²

The third camp is the Camp at the End of the Mind. This, the generic camp, is a composite of all those places for which there are written descriptions. It reflects an assemblage of the published and unpublished record of workers' stories and opinions about their lives in the turpentine industry. The Camp at the End of the Mind is not so brutal as some of the earlier period nor so bucolic as many which come after. The Camp at the End of the Mind is an acknowledgment that the neat periodizations of the historian do not often fit the historical record; too many blurred or grey areas confront the researcher to allow for pat categories. The Camp at the End of the Mind could be earlier or later because the slow pace of technological change within the industry made for a commonality over time rare in this century. Such a camp might be found anywhere in north Florida, for these broad-brush categories are shot through with exceptions. The Camp at the End of the Mind, then, is an attempt to distill the essential elements of camp experience from the historical record that one might reify and resurrect these camps as comprehensible places.

The historical importance of naval-stores activities has not been well documented, and even an elementary knowledge of its operation is no longer well known. Naval stores production began almost immediately upon the arrival of the English colonists who chopped deep gashes into the trunks of pine trees

2. The St. Johns County camp, the McFarland place, still operating in 1984, was the subject of a research project on the history of naval stores conducted by the editorial office, University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS), University of Florida, Gainesville. A master video tape was produced. The tapes containing research data and photographs are catalogued by color code. The master and research tapes are in the University of Florida Oral History Archives, Florida Museum of Natural History, Gainesville.

growing in Virginia and the Carolinas and periodically gathered the crystallized gum resin from the ground at the base of the tree. Such crude methods gave way by the eighteenth century to the use of wooden boxes constructed to catch the resin and thus keep it free of dirt. The industry flourished throughout the eighteenth and the first three quarters of the nineteenth centuries— particularly in North Carolina. The resin was used principally as a means of sealing hulls and protecting rigging from the weather. The absence of any method of conservation led to the destruction of the virgin coniferous forests of the Carolinas, and the industry moved steadily southward into Georgia.³

Meanwhile, in Florida the Spanish had developed a small naval stores industry in the early eighteenth century, and with the coming of the British in 1763, production increased substantially. The second Spanish period (1783-1821), however, saw a decline in the industry that lasted until the late nineteenth century when large-scale production got underway.⁴ By 1900 Florida was responsible for 31.8 percent of the naval stores production of the United States, and between 1905 and 1923 the state held first place in total naval stores output.⁵

While the early industry was centered around the production of resins, by the twentieth century turpentine had become the primary product in demand, and for the first few decades of the century the resins were discarded. Turpentine's uses were many; among them were its use as a thinner in paints, as a pharmaceutical, and surprisingly as flavoring in lime sherbert. By World War II the demand for resin had increased once again— this time as a sizing agent in paper used to facilitate the holding of ink print, as a catalyst for synthetic rubber, and as an additive in the manufacture of nylon, axel grease, and soap. The modern industry developed more refined methods of extracting turpentine from rosin (the dark residue of resin) as well as from pine stumps through a sulphuric chemical process.⁶

Throughout the period of maximum production (ca. 1900-1940), technological change was minimal and was limited to two

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3. IFAS master tape; Stanley C. Bond, Jr., "The Development of the Naval Stores Industry in St. Johns County, Florida," *Florida Anthropologist* 40 (September 1987), 189.
 4. Bond, "Development of the Naval Stores Industry," 189.
 5. *Ibid.*
 6. IFAS video tape, green 3.

significant advances. First, a new method of collection was introduced that lent greater efficiency to the operation. The Herty System substituted small clay cups which looked like flower pots (without the hole in the bottom) for the cumbersome wooden boxes. The cup, which was used with a system of metal gutters to direct the flow of resin, continued to be referred to as a "box." The second innovation was the application of sulphuric acid to the face of the tree in order to stimulate and maintain the flow of resin. The introduction of acid, which came into wide use after World War II, reduced the work force as the trees needed to be streaked (renewing of the wound above the box) only half as often as before.⁷ Otherwise, the tools, the methods, the animals, and the character of human labor were essentially the same as in earlier years. The hands were divided into squads, though an individual would serve in different squads with the change of seasons. The chipping squad, for example, was responsible for streaking the trees. This activity, lasting from the middle of March until the middle of November, had to be done about once a week before the use of acid and about every two or three weeks thereafter. The chippers used a tool called a hacker. The pulling squad worked in the late fall after regular production had ceased. Its task was to pull the crystallized resin off the old faces (the series of horizontal cuts made in the trunk of the tree) with a long-handled scraper. The dipping squad, the chief production arm, visited the boxes about every eight days or more depending on the age of the tree and the length of time it had been tapped. The workers poured the cups into a dip bucket weighing up to fifty pounds when full which was carried from tree to tree. When the bucket had been filled, the dipper carried it back to a mule-drawn wagon somewhere in his drift (a given area of forest for which each worker was responsible). The wagon carried two fifty-five gallon barrels. When the barrels were filled, the wagon was driven back to the still to be unloaded. Wagons continued in use in some camps until the 1950s. The resin was steam-melted out of the barrels on the second floor of the two-story stillhouse and allowed to flow into a great vat heated by a wood-fired oven below. The woodsrider was the overseer and was responsible for the

7. IFAS master tape.

entire operation of a smaller camp. He answered only to the manager (or in a few cases an overrider in a large camp). He was responsible for about six crops, each crop containing 10,000 boxes. It was his duty to ride horseback through the woods each day and to check every box to see that the cup and gutters were properly mounted, that the tree had been recently streaked, and that brush was cut and raked away from the tree bases as fire was an obvious hazard.⁸

While chippers, dippers, pullers, and ordinary still workers were almost always black, woodsriders were generally white, although this situation may not have prevailed for the later period in the eastern districts. A strict racial caste system was a hallmark of the camps of western and extreme northern Florida, including the Putnam Lumber Company camps of Dixie County where conditions reflected the most draconian excesses of Jim Crow associated with the last years of the nineteenth and the first three decades of the twentieth centuries.

Where the Florida Gulf coast makes its great, arching sweep toward the south to begin forming the western side of the peninsula, land and sea blur, and seasonal swamp and marsh extend inland for thirty to fifty miles. The land is heavily wooded with both hard and softwood species, and the region remains one of the last great game preserves of the eastern United States. As late as the 1920s, county formation in the area was incomplete, Dixie having been formed from Lafayette in 1921, and adjacent Gilchrist carved out of Alachua in 1927. The remoteness of the region persisted well into the twentieth century, and the area was characterized as a frontier in Florida Writers' Program reports as late as 1936.⁹ The population of the Dixie County seat, Cross City, was still only 1,500 by the time of that report, and no other significant settlement existed in other parts of the county at the time. On the western edge of Cross City the separate community of Shamrock maintained its individual identity as a milltown, home of the Aycok and Lindsay turpentine distillers. Buried several miles deep in the surrounding pine forest

8. IFAS video tape, white 2.

9. "Report on a Trip to Cross City" in "Turpentine Camp at Cross City" (Federal Writers' Project, Work Projects Administration, typescript, 1936), 1, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville.

was the Blue Creek camp, one of many operated by the Putnam Lumber Company which held over 300,000 acres in the region. The manager of Blue Creek between about 1905 and 1922 was W. Alston Brown, known as Captain Brown by local residents ("captain" was the title generally accorded white men who supervised black gang labor). Brown was assisted by his brother Mose in running the camp. An accidental exposure to the extremes of the debt peonage system associated with the turpentine camps at that time led to the prolonged legal crusade of Gainesville District Attorney Frederick C. Cubberly whose investigations provide a description of life within the Blue Creek camp.

Interviewing some forty-three witnesses, including white camp guards and former black workers, federal special agents were able to brook local noncooperation and provide evidence which eventually brought Brown to trial on charges of murder and peonage, although the outcome of the trial is unclear. The depositions paint a repelling picture of life at Blue Creek and the surrounding Putnam camps. The company provided employees with shanties and a commissary that carried virtually everything deemed necessary for life in the camp, including furniture. Workers were required to make all their purchases from the commissary, and, indeed, it would have been difficult for them to have done otherwise as they were almost without exception prohibited from ever leaving the camp on the basis of supposed debts owed to Brown.¹⁰ The camp was surrounded by barbed wire, and one or two guards patrolled the perimeter regularly.¹¹ After supper the hands were locked-up in their shanties. Men, women, and children were often whipped for any sort of infraction, real or imaginary.¹² Two especially striking aspects of camp life that reveal Brown's control over the workers and their families were the gambling and prostitution operations.

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10. Affidavit of Sam Miller and others taken by John Bonyne and E. J. Carter, federal special agents, Cross City, Florida, April 24-30, 1922, 1, Frederick C. Cubberly Papers, box 41, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History.
 11. Affidavit of Mollie Squire taken by John Bonyne, Savannah, Georgia, June 1, 1921, 1, *ibid*.
 12. Many witnesses testified to this effect according to material in the Cubberly Papers. See also Jerrell H. Shofner, "Forced Labor in the Florida Forests: 1880-1950," *Journal of Forest History* 25 (January 1981), 21.

The regular work week lasted from six o'clock Monday morning until noon on Saturday. Saturday was the monthly payday, and a worker might receive money at that time. Many workers reported that they had no idea on what basis they were paid nor what debts they owed. The hands, including the women, were then required to enter the gambling house where Brown controlled the games, making and changing the rules at whim. If a worker ran out of money to gamble, Brown would toss them a handful of bills charging the amount to their purported debt. Anyone who refused to gamble was whipped. Gambling continued until six on Monday morning. This was a weekly occurrence held without regard to payday.¹³ Another device that Brown employed to steal from the workers in a place where money itself had little meaning, was the sale of Liberty Bonds during World War I. Few of the depositioners report receiving bonds, but many were charged with their purchase.¹⁴

Brown also contrived to turn the women in the camp into prostitutes. This feat was accomplished by issuing what were termed "cross-time" slips. If Brown wanted a certain man to have sex with a certain woman, he gave the man a slip to take to the woman who was then to sleep with him and fill out the slip according to the length of time the two spent together. The woman then brought the slip to Brown who would read its value and return some part of its worth to the woman, holding some back supposedly to be applied to her debt. If any black man requested to have sex with any black woman in the camp, Brown saw to it that he had the opportunity, providing he had the money to pay Brown for the service. If the woman objected, she was given fifty lashes. If she was married and her husband objected, he was confined to the stockade. On occasion, new men came into the camp and chose married women with whom they stayed for months at a time while the husband languished behind bars.¹⁵

Another bizarre and highly macabre feature of Blue Creek was the camp cemetery. All hands were buried there, and for

13. Affidavit of Lizzie Bush taken by Bonyne, Trenton, Florida, November 11, 1921, 1, and the testimony of numerous other witnesses, Cubberly Papers.

14. Affidavit of Rena French taken by Bonyne, Cross City, April 24-30, 1922, 4, *ibid*.

15. *Ibid*.

those who died a natural death, the company furnished a headstone inscribed with their name, former address, and their length of service with the company. For those who died as a result of whippings or beatings, a board with the admonition to all that such would be their fate inscribed upon the wood sufficed. Newcomers to the camp were given a tour of the cemetery for their immediate edification.¹⁶

In order to promote the closest sort of daily control over the workers, Brown utilized informants who reported any word said against him. While weapons were forbidden in the camp (though sharp tools served nicely in the many fights that broke out), guns were issued to a cadre of Browns "pets" who were authorized to shoot and kill anyone who attempted escape. These men, picked from among the black labor force, were also charged with the special duty of looking out for government men and warning Brown of their approach. The guards were also enmeshed in the debt system, for if anyone did manage to cut the barbed wire and swim the mile-wide lake beyond to freedom, that person's debts had to be assumed by the errant guard.¹⁷

Since no informed person would have sought employment under Captain Brown, the company was only able to maintain its work force by virtue of the labor legislation existing in Florida during the period 1891-1942, and by the related convict leasing system that continued into the 1920s.

The Florida labor statutes of 1891 set a precedent that permitted the development of peonage in certain Florida industries. The law stated that anyone who accepted "money or other personal property" on a promise to perform "service" and then "abandons the service of said hirer without just cause" was "guilty of a misdemeanor" and was subject to "fine or imprisonment of up to one year."¹⁸ It was common practice for employers in the turpentine and lumber industries to offer new employees a small advance, either in cash or in credit at the commissary, for living expenses until payday. By means of nefarious book-keeping practices such debts were never paid off. It then became

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.* Topographic maps of the area for the period do not indicate any mile-wide areas of open water, but there were many seasonal marshes.

18. *Laws of Florida*, 1891, chapter 4032, 57-58.

a crime to leave the employ of the company, and if an escape was made, a friendly sheriff was generally on hand to return the offending party for a small gratuity. The escapee would then be charged with fraud and fined or given a six-month sentence. In any event, the worker would either owe his fine to the company, which would obligingly pay it off, or he would be sentenced to a work gang that quite often was leased by the state or county to the same company from which the worker had first run away. There was no escape.¹⁹

In addition virtually to legalizing peonage, federal statutes notwithstanding, and authorizing the convict leasing system, the 1907 Florida legislature passed additional laws to ensure an adequate labor supply for the state's forest industries. The 1907 law declared vagrants to be persons over the age of eighteen without means of support and those who "remain in idleness."²⁰ Thus, nearly anyone deemed idle could be arrested, summarily charged and convicted, and dispatched to the nearest lumber or turpentine camp where his debts would inevitably mount.

In addition to these methods, Brown, for one, would entrap relatives seeking to learn the fate of a husband or son. Such occurrences were facilitated by censoring mail to and from the outside. Outgoing letters were addressed by Brown himself, and any mail that got out not addressed in his handwriting was never answered, thus leading one to suspect that the postmaster, like many other local residents who saw their interests as one with the camp, was in collusion with Brown.

In August 1921, Georgia Jones received the following letter from her son at Blue Creek presumably mailed with the approval of Brown:

Cross City, Fla.
Aug. 9, 1921

My dear Mother:

I will write you a few lines to let you hear from me. Mother I would have written you before now but I could not ever get

19. Shofner, "Forced Labor in Florida's Forests," 15. See also Shofner, "Mary Grace Quackenbush, A Visitor Florida Did Not Want," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 58 (January 1980), 273-90, and "Postscript to the Martin Tabert Case: Business as Usual in the Florida Turpentine Camps," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 60 (October 1981), 161-73.

20. *Laws of Florida*, 1907, Chapter 5720, 234.

paper to do it with. Been down here working in water for four days and now my feet have done got water poison and I aint been able hardly to walk— an Willie is gone I dont know where he is. I am sick from wading in this water. I want to leave here and I want you and Ma to try and send me two dollars if you can get it so I can leave from this place, that is the only way that I can get away from here is walk. They will put me in jail so try to get \$2.00 for me. I will leave here I am in Taylor [Dixie] county where people is bad. I am sick and my foot is awful sore an no one to help me but you all. So send it this week if you can and let Ma help you get it so Good By— Send it to Cross City, Fla., put my name on it and put it in care of Capt. Brown. I am on his place sick and you must not register the letter you must put the money in the letter if you dont they wont give it to me.²¹

There is no extant description of the Blue Creek camp, but a description of another Dixie County camp a decade later may provide some idea of what Blue Creek was like. “It is on a broad sand elevation, against a dark jungle of cabbage palms and hardwoods; the other three sides are boggy pine woods. The light pine shacks are set in rows forming a horseshoe, with a mule stockade at the far end and the commissary at the entrance, along with the plain, neat house of the commissary keeper and his family.”²² The commissary is described as a “small frame one-room building.” It contained a “simple counter and shelves”; the stock was “well-rounded’ and included groceries, patent medicines, dry goods, and household items. The white operator, who was also the woods rider, sold women’s hose for sixty cents and handkerchiefs for five.²³ This description suggests an order and regularity incompatible with the image of Blue Creek, yet the writer described many of the same abuses that had occurred at Blue Creek and other Dixie County camps since 1910 or even earlier.

The brutal regimen at Blue Creek and the Putnam Lumber Company camps of Dixie County was not exceptional in the

21. Affidavit of Georgia Jones taken by H. P. Wright, Jacksonville, Florida, September 7-8, 1921, 1, Cubberly Papers.

22. “Trip to Cross City,” 5-6.

23. *Ibid.*

Florida backwoods.²⁴ While some of Alston Brown's more psychopathic practices may have been unique to Blue Creek and environs, the imprisonment and physical abuse of labor was common, as is indicated by secondary sources. Frederick Cubberly's first exposure to peonage and kidnapping occurred in Levy County in 1901.²⁵ The famous Clyatt case, which established Cubberly as a vigorous prosecutor of peonage cases, occurred in that county five years later. While the defendants were Georgians, United States Attorney John Eagan's investigation led Cubberly to write that incidents of the kidnapping of labor for the purposes of peonage "are almost every day occurrences in this locality [Levy County]."²⁶

In 1924, Orland Kay Armstong, head of the Department of Journalism at the University of Florida, conducted an investigation of debt peonage in the state's turpentine industry. He concluded that "most of these men sentenced to the gang were recruited under misrepresentation; were forced to work under intolerable conditions; were caught and held under warrants that assert a misdemeanor under an unconstitutional law, and sentenced without a semblance of a defense for fraud."²⁷

In west Florida's Calhoun County, a 1925 case, also prosecuted by the tenacious Cubberly, led to the conviction—unusual for the day—of five white men who had aided a certain Mood Davis, turpentine operator, in beating four blacks who had at-

24. Shofner provides evidence for peonage and murder at a number of central and south Florida sawmills and turpentine and lumber camps. Given the nature of these forest industries, many camps were in remote areas such as the Big Bend region of the Gulf coast, the lower Apalachicola River basin of west Florida, and the Kissimmee Valley of south-central Florida (Holopaw in Osceola County, for example). Shofner, "Forced Labor in Florida's Forests," 22.

25. Rosewood, the scene of the Rosewood massacre, is also located in Levy County. For an account of the murder of an unknown number of blacks in 1923 see Gary Moore, "Rosewood Massacre," *The Floridian*, Sunday magazine section of the *St. Petersburg Times*, July 25, 1982, 6-18. John L. Williams, a retired black woods rider of Alachua County, confused the name of this town with the Blue Creek camp, calling the camp Rose Garden. The Rosewood massacre is a part of the oral tradition of local black residents. Elvin Brooks, Sr., interviewed by author, Grove Park, Florida, April 16, 1987. Pete Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South: 1901-1969* (Urbana, IL, 1972), 5.

26. Daniel, *Shadow of Slavery*, 5.

27. *New York World*, November 24, 1929, cited in Walter Wilson, *Forced Labor in the United States* (New York, 1933), 98.

tempted escape from Davis's camp.²⁸ In the previous year, T. W. Higgenbotham beat to death Martin Tabert, a North Dakota farm boy, in a Madison County camp. Because the victim was white, the case captured national attention.²⁹ The investigation of the Tabert case led to further disclosures of abuses in the area. State Senator T. J. Knabb, it was revealed, was involved in peonage at his turpentine camp in Baker County, and thirteen years later his brother, William Knabb, was also implicated on a peonage charge. Through the late 1930s William Knabb operated a camp employing "several hundred black workers" that, according to one Florida historian, "was as repressive as any reported in the state since the turn of the century."³⁰ There, guards manned all roads from the camp, workers were held against their will at the pay rate of fifty cents to one dollar per day, the employees were forced to buy from a commissary which doubled outside prices, spies were employed to inform on their fellow workers, and beatings were commonplace. In 1937, William Knabb was finally brought to trial in a peonage case by another turpentine operator from Alachua County whose own brother was beaten by Knabb's henchmen in an attempt to pick up some laborers from the camp. The chief witness for the defense was proven to have perjured himself, but nevertheless, the Jacksonville jury acquitted Knabb and his codefendants.³¹

Numerous investigations over the years from 1901 until the 1950s turned up an increasing mass of evidence supporting the view that conditions in many of Florida's turpentine camps were a national disgrace.³² Blue Creek was no exception— not in terms of its conditions, nor in terms of redress— for after Alston Brown was finally removed from Blue Creek and brought to

28. Daniel, *Shadow of Slavery*, 140-41.

29. For a discussion of the Tabert case, see Noel Gordon Carper, "The Convict Lease System in Florida, 1866-1923 (Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1964), 330-80. Also see Noel Gordon Carper, "Martin Tabert, Martyr of an Era," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 52 (October 1973), 115-31.

30. Shofner, "Forced Labor in Florida's Forest," 23. See also Carper, "Convict Lease System," 361-66.

31. Shofner, "Forced Labor in Florida's Forests," 24.

32. Carper, "Convict Lease System," chapters V-XI. For the later periods, see Shofner, "Forced Labor in Florida's Forests." These investigations led to the abolition of leasing state prisoners in 1919, and of the county leasing system in 1923. Peonage continued, however, in various forms for many more years.

trial, his replacement was none other than T. W. Higgenbotham, the man who had beat the North Dakota boy to death a year earlier. Within another year Higgenbotham had killed at least one black worker at Blue Creek, another crime for which he was not convicted.³³

Fortunately, conditions were not everywhere so uniformly grim as in the western counties and those along the Georgia border. Life was hard in the turpentine camps of northeast Florida, but the sources indicate that the general mistreatment of labor was probably relatively less common in the camps along the St. Johns River and in the surrounding eastern counties, even in the period prior to World War II. The IFAS tapes containing oral interviews with approximately twenty former workers and their relatives, along with owners, managers, and their families support this view, as do oral interviews conducted by the author.³⁴

At the McFarland camp in St. Johns County, respondents gave no sign that any regime other than the traditional southern form of patron clientism, a kind of benign neglect disrespectful of human dignity in favor of condescending paternalism, ever existed in the quarters.³⁵ In addition to the taped interviews and many field shots of the contemporary McFarland place, the IFAS tape collection includes a number of still photographs that reveal much about these past conditions. The following summary of the material conditions in the St. Johns camps is based on these photographs, video tapes of oral interviews with those who experienced life in the camps some forty years ago, and on oral interviews conducted in Alachua County by the author.

Camp housing was of wood frame construction on raised brick piers. Each house had a fireplace. Houses were arranged in widely spaced rows, and trees were often absent, probably having been sawed for the lumber to construct the cabins. Heat must have been a problem for the women at home during the day under the low, gabled tin roofs. Photographs indicate that much time may have been spent on the tiny porches or in the

33. Shofner, "Forced Labor in Florida's Forests," 22.

34. This study is preliminary; more extensive research is anticipated in connection with a portion of the author's doctoral dissertation on forced labor systems in Africa and the Americas.

35. IFAS master tape.

yard, if shade trees were present. Outhouses were located to the rear of each dwelling. The company houses were generally referred to in retrospect as shanties or huts.³⁶

When new, the shanties probably provided adequate basic shelter, although without screens the insects must have been nearly intolerable in certain seasons. Without proper maintenance however— and there is no evidence of company maintenance— the wooden structures must have suffered from rot and warping. One respondent describes how she could watch the sunrise through the open cracks in the walls and that paper and cardboard stuffed between the boards would only be washed out by the rain.³⁷

Other structures in the camp included the commissary, the still, the company office, the woodsrider's house, and occasionally a church and a juke (bar). The commissary was often a well-constructed frame building arranged as any corner cross-road store. The still was nearly always a large two-story affair, open at both ends with sheds attached on either side. Around the still extensive, substantially constructed loading docks and ramps were built upon which heavy barrels of turpentine and resin were rolled. A brick chimney pierced the tin stillhouse roof for the emission of woodsmoke from the large ovens below.

Nutrition in the camps seems to have been generally adequate. Most houses had gardens producing summer and winter vegetables. All the respondents reported meat in their diet with one exception.³⁸ The commonly reported foods included corn bread, sweet potatoes, beans, peas, corn, collards, mustard greens, eggs, chicken, pork (in the form of white bacon), and some beef. Rice, tomatoes, squash, and pork roasts were more frequently reported by whites in the supervisory ranks, though the roast was reserved for holidays.³⁹ Fish was an important dietary supplement for all. Emaciated children or those with bloated stomachs are not evident in the photographic

36. IFAS video tapes, white C, orange E, green 6, white 1.

37. *Ibid.*, white 3. The house she describes may not have been a company house.

38. *Ibid.* Jessie May Henderson states, "We didn't know what fresh meat was hardly." John L. Williams reported that the family bought one pound of lard and one pound of meat per week, *ibid.*, white 2.

39. *Ibid.*, green 7; see also orange B, white 2 and white 3.

record. As one respondent put it, "Whether we owed the company or not— we et."⁴⁰

The men and women in the photographs seem relatively well-clothed. The men are wearing overalls with long-sleeve shirts underneath. Another feature is the felt hat. In one photograph, only the foremen wear snakeboots. The few women in photographs are in dresses or skirts and blouses. The managerial staff in another photograph wear ties with jackets or sweaters and hats perhaps donned for the occasion.⁴¹

The workday lasted from "can't to can't: that is from can't see in the morning to can't see at night."⁴² One white respondent, a woods rider, in an ambiguous note of racial tolerance, said he worked such long hours it got to where he "couldn't remember what color his wife was."⁴³ Wages were based on piecework. During the depression years of the 1930s, one truck driver earned thirty dollars monthly, about the same wage a fast man could earn hanging boxes in 1906.⁴⁴

Camp life was not rich in entertainment. The long hours and exhausting labor precluded virtually all other activity excepting the headlong rush to town on payday once a month. There the frustrations of what for many must have seemed a pointless existence emerged in drunkenness, gambling, and fighting.⁴⁵ There were occasional softball games and dancing, sometimes only to the accompaniment of hand-clapping.⁴⁶

Unlike farm children, the youngsters of the woods camp had much free time. Few attended school as the distance was too great, and the desire to go was often lacking. Instead, they played together, black and white alike, catching minnows and tadpoles in the drainage ditches and seeking minor misadventures which often resulted in difficulties with the adults. Both black and white women watched the children.⁴⁷

40. *Ibid.*, white 2 (John L. Williams interview).

41. *Ibid.*, orange K.

42. *Ibid.*, yellow E (Alan Neese interview).

43. *Ibid.*, green 5 (Andrew Woodard interview).

44. Elvin Brooks, interview by author; IFAS master tape.

45. IFAS video tape, green 6 (Austin Tilton interview); yellow F (Nettie Ruth Brown interview); white 2 (John L. Williams interview).

46. *Ibid.*, white 3 (Jamie Lee King interview); green 9 (Mrs. Reed interview); orange R.

47. *Ibid.*, yellow F (Nettie Ruth Brown interview).

Together with their child rearing duties, camp women boiled the gum-stiff clothing, canned, cooked two meals a day, and nursed the sick and injured. On occasion quarrels would erupt among the women, often in sympathetic response to the Saturday fights among their men. Sometimes the women's arguments ended in bloodshed as they resorted to the use of case knives or tatters (a three-sided tool used to sharpen a chipper's hack).⁴⁸ Now and then this violence was turned on their men. One respondent remembered being led by the hand by a young girl to her mother's home to find the husband's severed head lying in the yard while the lady of the house rocked placidly on the porch.⁴⁹

But life in a northeast Florida woods camp was not characterized by daily violence. There were only the inevitable punctuations of violence, perhaps symptomatic of an awareness that even the rest of the South's working class was passing them by, leaving them in the dust of a depression that elsewhere, by the early 1940s, was nearly over.

And what of the Camp at the End of the Mind? What can one say of this camp which lies perhaps somewhere in the pine flatwoods of the interior of Florida? What can one say of its gradual evolution toward an accommodation with the contemporary world outside— of its slow decline and simultaneous convergence with modernity? What would the turpentiners have to say for themselves?

Perhaps they would speak of the falling demand for the product, of the loss of credit from the factorage houses, of the shanties standing vacant but for rats and snakes and chimney swallows. But some would also proudly insist that their lives were not so bad, that they generally got enough to eat, and that most of the boys got along all right. They might remember that the captain had to get after one or two of the hands for fighting now and then, that sometimes a man might run off, but with only babbits in his pocket he would inevitably return to the camp commissary, the only place he could spend them. They would tell of their hopes for their children and of difficulties in getting them to the distant school. The turpentiners knew they were different. They knew they were on the bottom of the socio-

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.

economic ladder. They probably sensed that there would be no jobs in turpentine for their children— but their children's concerns would be the worries of the future— they had time to think only about the present.

Two questions arise in regard to the changes observed in the camps over time and place. Why were conditions generally worse west of the Suwannee River and why did overall conditions improve despite a declining industry? The answer to the first question may lie in the local geography of the region. What is today referred to in tourist brochures as the Big Bend area has always been out of the main stream of commerce and settlement. The remote quality of the area lent itself to rough and ready approaches reminiscent of the Old West, and such conditions gave rise to an economic regime characterized by direct methods of labor coercion. In addition, the remote area was far from the scrutiny of the public eye. The St. Johns River district, on the other hand, was athwart the major north-south lanes of commerce along Florida's east coast. By the 1940s, the area's proximity to the expanding population center and military hub of Jacksonville, as well as the sizable tourist cynosure of St. Augustine, led to the introduction of cosmopolitan influences and a more viable free-labor market.

As to the second question pertaining to the improvement of labor conditions in the face of a declining industry, it must first be noted that the opposite trend might have been expected. After all, gradual decline in a given industry has typically resulted in a worsening of the terms of labor in accordance with falling profits and deteriorating terms of credit, among other factors. In the case of turpentine, however, camp life improved markedly during and after the World War II era, while simultaneously the demand for turpentine and resin gradually declined. The direct cause of improved labor conditions was the gradual modification of the state's labor laws. These changes made it increasingly difficult for the lumber and turpentine interests to secure the cooperation of the state in ensuring a plentiful yet impotent labor pool. Repeal of the old laws was partially the result of a weakening forest industry lobby in Tallahassee and, at a broader level, of the growing hegemony of national interests accelerated by World War II. In any event, it is inconceivable that given the supraregional rationalization of the United States' postwar economy, the more coercive aspects of

the system could have been maintained for many decades more. For north Florida the last vestiges of forced labor and the process of primitive capital accumulation had been eliminated, and fully advanced relations of production in the form of mechanized pine plantations and centralized distilleries could now take their place.