CHAPTER 7

SPIRITS IN THE PINES: CONVICT AND PEONAGE LABOR IN THE TURPENTINE ORCHARD AND THE CAMP QUARTERS 1880 to 1950

In the decades following 1865, the breakdown of social and economic order in the South permitted the formulation of pernicious labor codes that inculcated poor and illiterate white yeomen and black freedmen. Seeking to settle wandering bands of landless Negroes, the federal government encouraged the institution of sharecropping. Labor contracts stipulated that farmers could share harvests with field hands rather than pay wages.[1] This tenant farming arrangement was much abused, and widespread peonage evolved throughout the region and in other areas of the United States. Although

outlawed by Congress in 1867,[219] post-Civil War racism imbued peonage schemes that enslaved workers in coerced employment.[220] With financial resources scarce and bankruptcy looming, Southern capitalists exploited blacks and whites through the combination of low wages and credit merchandising. Through Jim Crow laws formulated in the post-Reconstruction period, the Southern judicial system oppressed the poor, allowing local sheriffs to discriminately arrest "vagrants" and put them to work on chain gangs. Yet in the face of extreme racism in the post-war South, rural African-Americans preserved a rich cultural heritage on turpentine and sawmill camps.[221]

The turpentine boom that began in the 1880s provided badly needed jobs for former slaves. Laws and local custom permitted woodsriders (field overseers) to control turpentine hands through intimidation, physical abuse, and incarceration.[222] In lieu of cash, managers often paid off crews in babbitts, company script, or credit chits redeemable only at camp commissaries (general stores). During the boom years of the Florida turpentine trade, 1890 to 1926, few roads existed and even fewer motor vehicles. Lack of personal transportation gave camp owners a monopoly on the grocery and dry goods business among

the workers on the isolated turpentine camps. This situation began to change during the late twenties as access to transportation became more generally available.[223]

This practice of paying workers in non-cash wages was eventually discontinued after Congress outlawed privately-minted currency during the 1930s. But tokens, at least, appear to have continued to circulate in turpentine and sawmill camps for some time after the law was enacted. The three mediums of exchange -- babbitts, company script, and credit chits -- have survived in private collections and in those of a few museums.[224] Some material culture curators have mistakenly identified babbitts as coins, but, in actuality, they represented tokens with assigned currency values, not unlike the modern-day subway tokens. Turpentiners also called these tokens "light money" and "jugaloo." Collectors have traced the minting of naval stores tokens to the decade of the 1850s in Florida. Babbitt specimens examined in the collections of the Florida Agricultural Museum ranged in value from five cents to two dollars in specie. They differed from United States coinage in that the size of the tokens graduated from small to large in relation to value. A complete mint set of babbitts from a specific naval stores company generally included five, ten, twenty-five, and fifty cent, and

one dollar pieces. While no single cent piece has turned up in private collections, some values higher than one dollar have been found.[225]

Private mints originally stamped out the tokens in brass or copper, but, by the twentieth century, primarily used aluminum. Tokens had geometric shapes of four, six, or eight sides in addition to the more common circular disks. In some cases, tokens had aluminum center disks with copper or brass bezel surrounds. One collector interviewed by the author stated that the elaborate shapes and bimetallic composition were intended to discourage counterfeiting. The naval stores operator had his company name stamped on the obverse, with the token's value on the reverse side. Usually, these tokens could only be redeemed in the turpentine camp operator's commissary whose name appeared on them. However, in some instances, local businesses, trades people, and even doctors accepted this secondary "currency" in payment for goods or services. In these cases, the naval stores company exchanged the vendors' babbitts for specie.[226]

The naval stores industry used another alternative to cash wages called company script. The camp operator issued this paper "currency" to employees in lieu of specie. Script in the Florida Agricultural Museum collection represented, in

essence, receipts for wages earned. The camp manager or bookkeeper inked in cash values on pre-printed forms. Workers could apply these receipts against accrued debt or use them to make new purchases at the camp commissary. The credit chit accounted for a second type of paper currency. Small pasteboard cards were padded into "coupon" booklets and issued as wages. Each card had five and ten cent values printed along its four edges, totaling $1.25. As the worker made purchases, the storekeeper punched out corresponding amounts until the chit was used up. While most informants denied that specie could be found among laborers on turpentine camps, Zora Hurston refuted these claims, and a photograph taken on pay day at one camp revealed workers shooting dice for coins, 22-caliber cartridges, and cigarettes.[227]

The naval stores operator obtained groceries and merchandise on credit from Consolidated Grocery Company and its parent, Consolidated Naval Stores Company. A few other firms also provided this service in Florida as evidenced by newspaper ads. But, Consolidated had a near monopoly on this part of the trade. Turpentine farmers sold the food and dry goods through a general store located on the main camp, and, in rare instances, on side (secondary) camps. Their workers purchased food and general merchandise from the storekeeper in exchange for the camp operator's

currency (babbitts, credit chits, company script), cash, or on credit. This charge arrangement had been widely used since colonial times with store owners accepting commodities raised locally in exchange for their merchandise. The relatively modern grocery store chains and their cash-only policies ended the era of the "mom and pop" general store and corner grocery, however.[228]

In typical commissary operations, camp owners marked up prices approximately fifty to sixty-five percent or more over those charged by retail merchants. This practice more than paid the interest levied by the factorage on the owners' debts. The commissary and the secondary economy it represented held three advantages for the camp owner. A portion of the camp's overhead was offset as workers returned wages to the company in exchange for dry goods and groceries. The camp operator benefited from a substantial secondary income by charging inflated prices, thereby devaluing wages. But, most importantly, this practice helped provide a reliable labor pool for camps. Florida laws allowed employers to compel workers to remain on the job until all debts owed to the employer were satisfied.[229]

Nefarious bookkeepers underpaid wages and overcharged employees' commissary accounts.[230] Selling supplies to turpentiners at greatly inflated prices

kept families perpetually obligated to the company store.[231] Under Florida law, indebted wage earners had to stay on the job until they paid up accounts or risked going to jail.[232] Empowered by this legislation and local indifference, employers kidnapped runaways with as much force as necessary and returned them to the job.[233] Operators exploited these statutes, enslaving workers through economic bondage that provided a steady labor supply.[234]

County sheriffs colluded with naval stores operators and arrested potential laborers under the authority of the loosely defined vagrancy laws. In some cases, the police and local judges received bounties from turpentine operators for providing them with county convicts. The abuses of these statutes first came to the attention of the federal government when J. O. Helveston forcibly kidnapped a former employee, George Huggins, from his Otter Creek, Florida home. Fred Cubberly, United States commissioner for the Northern District of Florida, witnessed the abduction and began research that eventually uncovered the 1867 federal law forbidding peonage practices. Encouraged by his Justice Department superiors, Cubberly indicted a Tifton, Georgia farmer, Samuel M. Clyatte, for peonage practices in 1902. Cubberly successfully prosecuted a conviction and four-year sentence in federal court,

but the United States Supreme Court overturned the case in a 1905 appeal. Cubberly attributed the successful appeal to a $90,000 defense fund contributed by the naval stores industry throughout the Southeast.[235]

However, a New York attorney, Mary Grace Quakenbos, first brought Florida peonage practices to the attention of the public in 1906. Although most naval stores operations employed Negroes in woodswork and distillation, New York labor contractors also hired immigrants at quayside on the Hudson River, especially those who could not speak English. With this deficiency, naval stores and lumber employers would not have to worry about these white Europeans testifying in court. Deceitful agents enticed these new arrivals, particularly Polish Jews, with promises of jobs and housing in the Deep South, including Florida. During a visit to southern labor camps, Quackenbos learned that several thousand laborers had been defrauded in this scheme. She turned testimony obtained in Florida over to the Justice Department. After a secret investigation of the Jacksonville Lumber Company of Pensacola by federal agents, five company managers received prison terms or fines. These convictions were an exception, however, with many more cases resulting in acquittals. The trials did have the effect of shutting down the immigrant

traffic from New York, after which the Justice Department lost interest in prosecuting peonage cases for a time.[236]

Fred Cubberly continued to investigate the Florida naval stores industry, though he received scant support from Washington. Unconcerned about federal scrutiny, the state legislature passed an even more onerous peonage statute in 1907. But, Florida newspapers continued to exposé brutal accounts of torture and murder on lumber and turpentine camps. Increasingly, the public came to detest peonage practices and the state and county leasing of prisoners. While the state prison system instituted some reforms in their convict leases, many counties either did not have the resources or the humanity to follow suit.[237]

In 1919, the Florida legislature had rescinded the authority of the prison system to lease state convicts. But, in 1921, Commissioner Cubberly uncovered evidence of peonage practices condoned by the Putnam Lumber Company in Taylor County. The Chicago-based forest-products giant owned a number of turpentine camps in addition to its extensive sawmilling works in North Florida. Putnam employee, Alston Brown, operated what amounted to a concentration camp complete with fenced enclosure and armed guards. The conditions of the camp and the

"laws" regulating the lives of his workers must be interpreted as the manifestations of a deranged sadist. Cubberly brought Brown to trial where damning testimony detailed enforced gambling and prostitution, routine beatings, and other gruesome disciplines. Cubberly prosecuted Brown, but the trial was eclipsed by the murder of a white man, Martin Tabert, on Putnam's Madison County naval stores operation.[238]

At least to the national press, the Tabert homicide represented the most notorious, and certainly the most widely publicized instance of county lease abuses. Tabert, a young man from a prosperous South Dakota family, was arrested for hoboing -- stealing a ride on a train -- by Leon County Sheriff J. R. Jones in 1921. A thoroughly corrupt public official, Sheriff Jones had a "private arrangement" to send leased convicts to Putnam on a fee-paid, quota basis. During his all-too-brief stay in the Leon County jail, Tabert wired his family for money to pay his fine. But, in less than 48 hours, a Leon County judge convicted Tabert, and Jones delivered the prisoner to the Madison turpentine camp operated by Putnam employee, T. W. Higginbotham. By the time Tabert's family learned of their son's whereabouts, Tabert had been beaten to death by the camp's whipping boss at the direction of Higginbotham for not working hard enough. (In a 1990 interview on National Public

Radio, former Governor LeRoy Collins recounted in savage detail the circumstances surrounding the homicide and the national shame brought upon the state as a result.) Putnam officials tried to whitewash the murder but eventually settled a civil suit by paying a $20,000 settlement to the bereaved family. For his part, Higginbotham received a twenty-year conviction for manslaughter, but the sentence was quashed on appeal. The murderous bossman remained a Putnam employee, and, after taking Alston Brown's place at the Blue Lake turpentine camp near Shamrock, Florida, killed yet another man and escaped prosecution.[239]

In writing about the Florida naval stores industry, social historians have concentrated their investigations upon the convict lease labor force. With out question, some of the most abusive camp bossmen locked convicts in barracks surrounded by stockades under the baleful observation of armed guards. Wearing the clothes they worked in, prisoners slept head to toe, each one shackled to "the night chain." Escapees were captured with the aid of local constabulary, and, in some extreme cases, summarily executed or beaten to death back at the camp.[240]

From 1889 until 1919, the state prison system, operated by the state's Department of Agriculture, accepted bids from private individuals and businesses for the hire of state prisoners. This practice found

its origins in Kentucky and had been instituted in Florida prior to the Civil War as the state had no penal system.[241] Florida, however, was the only state to lease women - black and white, and also the aged, decrepit, and the young. (After 1914, the prison system provided only "able-bodied male prisoners" for the lease.) The highest bidder accepted all available convicts, but subleased prisoners to various individuals and businesses. Among Florida industries using convicts, railroads, farms, phosphate mines, and naval stores operations leased the majority of prisoners. During the 1880s, railroads employed more prison labor than other enterprises. With the rise to prominence of Florida naval stores, turpentine operators became the largest lessees in 1890, but, in some succeeding years, were replaced by phosphate mines. Between 1909 and 1914, the Florida Pine Company, a subsidiary of Consolidated Naval Stores Company, held the state prison lease contract. During that six-year period, the company showed a profit of $345,540.10 obtained through subleasing state convicts to turpentine camps.[242]

When compared to the numbers of free labor engaged in the naval stores industry, the percentage of state convict labor remained relatively stable and small. From 1880 until 1910, prison and census data indicated that state convicts comprised approximately

seven to eight percent of all naval stores employees.[243] Only in the 1890 census, when fewer than 500 Floridians reported working in naval stores, did state convict participation represent a significant 39 percent of the labor force. Overall, fewer than ten percent of turpentine farmers worked state convicts. At the height of the Florida turpentine boom (1907-1909), the Bureau of Census tabulated 593 naval stores businesses that employed over 18,000 turpentiners. During this period, the Florida Department of Agriculture listed 61 turpentine, lumber, and phosphate camps with 1233 state convicts.[244]

Unfortunately, the U. S. Census did not uniformly report statistics of the work force engaged in the naval stores trade during the period 1880 to 1920, making decade comparisons difficult. (However, work force composition by age listed in Table 2 can be used to provide a statistical snapshot for the year 1910.)

Table 2[245]

1910 Census: Total Males and Females Over 10 Years of Age	On Turpentine Farms	On Stills (distilleries)
10 - 13 years old	353	64
14 - 15 years old	391	85
16 - 20 years old	1,533	324
21 - 44 years old	9,676	2,116
Over 45 years old	1,594	394
	13,547	2,983

Although Florida newspapers of the period published sensational reports of homicides and torture on turpentine camps, state prison authorities used annual inventories of inmates to dispute these accounts. In responding to mounting criticism from the press, the state government employed inspectors who visited every camp that leased state convicts. At first these inspections were made bimonthly, but the frequency later increased to monthly. State inspectors filed detailed reports that included information about punishments meted out, living and working conditions, as well as, the health of each inmate. Inspectors removed from the work force prisoners suffering medical problems and sent them for treatment to one of several state convict hospitals.[246]

While the death rate for inmates doubled that of the general population, it remained within the range of one to four percent over the years of the lease. In examining the causes of death, tuberculosis and venereal disease were most common with many of the prisoners who subsequently died already infected at the time of incarceration. During the period of 1874 to 1920, an average of seven state prisoners a year died from gunshot wounds inflicted during escape attempts, and there was reported only one lynching. Inspectors did allude to abuses suffered by convicts leased from county jails, but could do nothing as

state government had no jurisdictional powers over county prisons. Unfortunately, insufficient data has survived to draw any conclusions about conditions at the county level. However, prior to the statewide revocation of convict leasing by the 1923 Florida Legislature, Hillsborough and Alachua counties had discontinued the system. In Leon County, legislative investigations had led to the removal of Sheriff Jones for actions related to the death of Martin Tabert.[247]

Certainly, court records for the period 1901 to 1950 documented peonage labor conditions and, in extreme cases, of torture and death on Florida turpentine camps. N. G. Carper, in his unpublished dissertation, extensively recounted newspaper stories about abusive treatment and murders on turpentine camps. Jerrell Shoftner has expanded upon that work with journal articles detailing Fred Cubberly's crusade to eliminate forced labor practices. Even after the United States Supreme Court set aside the Florida peonage laws in 1944 with its decision in *Pollock* v. *Williams* appeal, peonage continued to flourish. (As late as the last decade of the twentieth century, migrant labor contractors have been charged with using forced labor.) But, available data have substantiated that the majority of naval stores operators did not lease prisoners, using free labor instead. Yet, the cultural landscape of these workers

has been, to a large degree, overlooked by cultural anthropologists and historians.[248]

The most valuable contribution made in documenting the cultural landscape of turpentine and lumber camps can be found in the early literary works of Zora Neale Hurston. An African-American author (1891-1960) and Florida-born anthropologist, Miss Hurston crisscrossed the South from 1928 to 1930, collecting Negro folklore in turpentine quarters, sawmill camps, and on the front porches of tenant shacks and camp commissaries. She tramped through gallberry thickets and pineywoods, exploring the dangerous headwaters of African-American heritage. Hurston recorded a vibrant, energetic culture often hidden from the view of whites. She discovered guitar players, blues shouters, church singers, and root doctors. Her field notes documented stories, songs, children's games, hoodoo rituals, and herbal medicines. From these she wrote Mules and Men, a Negro folklore collection that evoked a rich, ethnographic portrait of racial attitudes in Depression era Florida.[249]

Exploited by a labor system that, at its worst, constituted economic slavery, African-Americans in the rural South shared a communal life that preserved their cultural identity. They grafted European customs to African roots, creating a hybrid folklore

that helped them endure and survive. Passed down from slave to freedman, from mouth to memory, each generation redefined evil, free will, and faith through songs and stories that explained the unexplainable, that elevated misery to a spiritual plane, that poked fun at whitey and themselves.[250]

Before publication of Mules and Men, white anthropologists depicted black oral traditions in a plantation context, "serene, kindly old darkies" spinning yarns to enthralled children. Scholarly treatises perpetuated popular stereotypes of a humble, inferior society swathed in cast-off rags of a virile, white world view. But, Zora Hurston's work probed the tap root of the African-American experience and extracted cultural legacies that resonated with historic and psychic significance.[251]

Closely attuned to the Negro lowest down, Miss Hurston eloquently described the odor of poverty, with its "dead dreams dropping off the heart like leaves in a dry season and rotting around the feet." She refused to portray Southern Negroes as servants and victims scarred physically and emotionally. Hurston breathed life into her folk-texts that illuminated a people assailed by extreme racism, disease, violence, and enforced ignorance. Simultaneously sacred and profane, Hurston's "quarters niggras" testified in authentic dialect profuse in proverb and anecdote.

From these sketches, a portrait of the cultural landscape of the Florida turpentine quarters has survived. It is richly textured with details of the everyday lives of turpentiners.[252]

Throughout this wiregrass region along the Florida, Georgia, and Alabama border, turpentine camps sprouted up deep in the pineywoods. Cheaply-constructed, two- and three-room shanties lined short, sandy roads that ran up past the fire still and the commissary to the white bossman's house.[253] In the workers' quarters, two households shared privies, and women hauled well water to washsheds where they boiled pine gum stiffened overalls in cast iron cauldrons.[254] These workers' villages were a hold-over from the slave quarters of antebellum times. This continuation of the plantation labor system and centralized housing of workers was not perpetuated in the tenant farming system, however. Unlike the slave communities, turpentine quarters seen in photographs from the collections of the Florida Agricultural Museum were more openly spaced apart on approximately one-eighth to one-quarter acre lots. From the exterior, the houses appeared to have two main rooms -- the living and sleeping area, and the kitchen. This design found it origins in the single-pen, log cabin introduced by Swedes in the Delaware region during the sixteenth century, rather than the Nigerian-styled shotgun

structure. Most often, the exterior brick chimneys were located on gable ends, but one camp featured fireplaces on the front walls instead. The planed lumber structures might be painted, whitewashed, or left unfinished. A number of the dwellings had attached shed rooms to either or both sides of the central core structures in addition to the shed room kitchen at the rear. These larger cabins most likely belonged to workers with families. On average, the turpentine operator invested about $200 in materials for each cabin with the woodsrider's and foreman's homes valued at double that figure. Since operators relocated the camp sites on average every seven to ten years as the pine stands worked out, the housing was not constructed with a view of permanence.[255] (However, some camps have survived to present day.) Historians have described the camp housing as lining either side of a single road leading up to the overseer's or owner's house. The few photographs remaining in museum collections did not verify this conclusion, however. All quarters photos examined by the author showed housing patterns more typical of platted subdivisions with multiple intersecting roads and houses arranged in blocks.[256] On camps managed under more progressive regimes, owners provided single-room schools and churches. On nearly all operations, the ubiquitous jook provided a place for

backwoods recreation which occasionally terminated in fatal shootings, Case-knife stabbings, and razor slashings.[257]

Turpentine families photographed in the 1920s and 30s appeared healthy, well-groomed, and adequately clothed. They supplemented staple diets of cornmeal, flour, rice, salt, cane syrup, and fatback (white bacon) purchased from commissaries with peas, beans, corn, sweet potatoes, collards, and mustard greens grown in kitchen gardens.[258] Milk cows, chickens, and, occasionally, pigs fed the quarters,[259] and cooks added fish, gopher tortoises, rabbits, squirrels, and other wild game to the family menu when available.[260] From metal lunch pails, woodsmen ate supper leftovers and cornbread or biscuit bread sopped in cane syrup and washed down with "squeezle" (molasses-sweetened water).[261]

Before the 1960s' civil rights reforms, blacks found few employment opportunities that competed with whites. With America's entry into World War I, however, blacks did follow new economic avenues leading out of the impoverished South to northern factories and railroads. The need for war materials increased as many workers left factory jobs to fight in the European conflict. Seeking replacements, American industrialists recruited Southern blacks in unprecedented numbers.[262]

Traditionally, Southern Negroes had filled jobs handed down from father to son, mother to daughter, generation to generation. As an old, pineywoods philosopher reminisced, "You is born into the teppentine. Ain't nothin' you go into. Something you get out of."[263] Life seemed bleak to outsiders, but turpentiners had little contact with the world beyond the pines. In depicting this cultural landscape, Hurston found her audience among blacks and whites. The publication of Mules and Men established her as a best-selling celebrity of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1930s along with better known artists like Langston Hughes.[264]

In Hurston's turpentine quarters, twilight darkened sand yards swept clean with broomcorn. Children, black and white, played "'Sissy in de Barn,' 'Chirck, mah Chirck, mah Craney crow,'" and other traditional African games. Adults sitting under shack overhangs or on commissary steps retold folktales and "woofed" boastful lies.[265] The day's labors at an end, "the 'job' reverted to the business of amusing itself."[266] Those so inclined, walked down to the jook where turpentiners congregated to gamble, drink, dance, and engage in flirtatious liaisons. Most camp managers forbade the sale of liquor in the quarters, but enterprising bootleggers sold low wine, alcohol strained from Sterno then mixed with sugar water and

spirits of niter.[267] The drudge in need of serious relief imbibed "coon dick" fermented from grapefruit juice, cornmeal mash, beef bones, and turpentine.[268] Journeymen blues-shouters, accompanied by bottleneck guitars, serenaded couples dancing the "snakehips" across pine floorboards patterned with cigarette burns and patinaed with blood, sweat, and spit. In the quarters and the pines, turpentiners developed a distinctive heritage and livelihood eventually eclipsed by industrialization as synthetics replaced natural gum ingredients.[269]

This shift to chemical extraction caused a profound change in Florida's pineland ecosystems, especially the dominant longleaf pine forests. As lumbermen cut-over mature longleaf pine stands, landowners replanted with pulpwood pines for paper manufacturing. Historically, lumber companies had leased their pine tracts to turpentine farmers for seven to eleven years before cutting the timber. But, by the late 1930s and early 1940s, it became the practice to only grant turpentine leases for one to two years or three to four years, not nearly long enough to recapture a naval stores operator's initial investment. In clear-cutting the state's pinelands, sawyers followed too closely upon the turpentiners' heels. With only poor stands left for turpentine operations, the forest products industry abandoned

traditional naval stores collection methods for more efficient chemical processes.[270]

The practice of clear-cutting caused profound changes in the pinelands and the biodiversity they supported. The large predators were the first effected by this massive transformation. The wolf was exterminated, and the panther relegated to the lower tip of the state where it has been doomed to eventual extinction as a zoo-bred genetic relic. The black bear has fared better, but has become prey of increased traffic, many needlessly slaughtered each year on the state's highways or poisoned by beekeepers. Other creatures, smaller and less visible, but no less important to the cycle of life in the pines have also been affected by habitat loss. Red-cockaded woodpeckers have become the most recent victims in the conversion of old pine stands to pulpwood plantations. The once-ubiquitous gopher tortoises and the many organisms with whom they share their burrows are listed as species of concern.[271]

From a biodiversity view point, the turpentiner proved less devastating than the tree farmer who took his place in the economic order. With the naval stores industry in decline, landowners replaced slower growing longleaf and slash pines with faster maturing loblolly pines.[272] This not only reduced the diversity of native plants and animals in the pinelands, but also virtually eliminated the cultural landscape of

the turpentine orchard and the longleaf pine forests it exploited. In 1989, less than a million acres of what had once been Florida's most-prolific ecosystem remained of spirits in the pines.