

Turpentine Chipping

In 1894, an energetic and enthusiastic young man of eighteen, Frank Wheeler Slocomb, came to this area. He located about two miles north of what would become the town of Slocomb. About 1897, the management of the Central of Georgia Railway Company elected to extend their line from Albany, Georgia to Florala, Alabama. This suggested an opportunity for a town. Among those stately pines that covered the area, Frank Slocomb conceived the idea of a thriving business and set to work to make his idea a reality. He set up a naval store business. In the days of wooden sailing ships, the term "naval stores" referred to tar and pitch. These two materials were essential for shipbuilding. Today the term includes any of the rosin, turpentine, pitch, and tar products obtained from pine, cypress, and other resinous trees.

The town of Slocomb was chartered in 1901 and early history said it was settled in 1898 by Frank Slocomb and his brother, Will. After the town was settled people soon began to move into the area.

When the Central of Georgia Railroad extended its lines from Albany, to Florala, it came through Slocomb. The Slocomb brothers quickly moved their turpentine operation to Slocomb. It was moved just south of the railroad on what is now State Road 103 across from the present Armory.

Early industry in the town included turpentine, cross ties, and lumber. Doc Anthony was chief of the crosstie business. Morris Lumber Co. controlled the saw mill, and the Slocomb brothers ran the turpentine business. The turpentine business was later owned and operated by Mr. George Washington Hinson.

Chipping for turpentine became a way of living. Slash and long leaf pine trees were mostly chipped for turpentine in this area. Slash pines produced more turpentine than the long leaf pines. A special tool called a "hack" was used to cut a V shape chip in the trees. A piece of metal was driven in the V shape leaving an opening at the bottom of the V to allow the turpentine to run down into containers. A clay cup was hung at the bottom of the opening for the turpentine to be collected in the cup. The clay cups were used for years until a metal pointed cup began to be used. The clay cups were easily broken especially during the winter when water would collect in them and the water would freeze and the cups would crack and break. The third cup used was an oblong tin cup, which was very efficient.

Trees for chipping turpentine usually ranged from 8" and larger. An 8" tree usually would accommodate 1 cup, 12" to 14" trees could accommodate 2 cups, and larger trees

could accommodate 4 to 8 cups. The procedure of chipping was repeated throughout the gathering period, which lasted from March through September. The turpentine was collected and put into 5 gallon buckets and carried to large barrels, which held 50 to 60 gallons of turpentine and weighing from 600 to 800 pounds. They were covered and secured well to keep from spilling when transporting to the still.

They were usually transported to the still by mule and wagon carrying 4 barrels. The turpentine (sap) was boiled in a vat. The boiling is done to get the by-products out. The part of the sap left in the vat is called rosin.

There were many uses for turpentine. It was used on sprains and bruises, and for pleurisy and bronchitis. It was used to remove paint stains from clothing and the skin. It was also used as thinner in paints and varnishes. There are many more uses for turpentine.

The second chip on a tree was made about an inch above the old chip. They would make chips on the trees as high up as they could reach. They used a tool called a "puller" to reach up high to make the V's in the trees.

The chips were sprayed with sulfuric acid to hold the pores open. This made the turpentine run twice as long, requiring less chipping.

A "scraper" was used to scrape the pitch off the trees, which was used to make turpentine also.

Before the cups were used to collect the turpentine, a hole was chipped in the trees to collect the turpentine. A clipper was used to dip the turpentine out of the hole and put into buckets.

In the winter months the trees had to be kept clean around to keep fire from burning the trees and destroying the turpentine.

Chipping for turpentine in this area began to decline in the 1930's, but it continued on a smaller scale until the early 1950's. I understand that chipping was a sticky, nasty, hard job.

The scars on the trees left by chipping are called "cat faces".

*Submitted by Charles R. Box, 1424 County Road 60, Slocumb, Alabama 36375-4130.
Telephone (334) 677-5826.*

Sources: Slocumb History, Jason J. Miles, Graceville, Florida.