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**A long quavering chant: Peonage labor camps in the
rural-industrial South 1905-1965**

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A long quavering chant: Peonage labor camps in the rural-industrial South 1905-1965

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Abstract: This dissertation is a study of social and environmental conditions inside rural industrial labor camps throughout the U.S. South between 1905 and 1965. The use of peonage labor, i.e., the coercion of labor against ones' will through indebtedness or violence impacted nearly a fourth of rural workers in the postbellum south, particularly in isolated railroad construction sites, lumber operations, turpentine camps, and commercial vegetable farms. Though employers' various peonage labor regimes changed within the context of the camps' physical environment and evolved over time, they continually took advantage of marginalized social groups, immigrants, African-Americans, and the poor. The relative inability of workers, their families, and reformers to prosecute employers and foremen for labor abuses stemmed from the collusion of local law enforcement and the indifference of federal government officials. Ultimately, broader market forces of globalization and technology changed peonage labor regimes, not the enforcement of federal statues outlawing the practice.

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Introduction

In May of 1906, Collie Sanders, known by his fellow workers as “White Child,” hired on as a guard in a railroad construction camp located deep in the forest outside Maryville, Tennessee, owned by the Louisville & Nashville Railroad, the forest. Sanders recalled that when company foremen brought “the first bunch of hands” into the camp, they appointed five guards—including Sanders and a man named Will Jones—to watch the men. The chief foreman, Martin Condon, gave Sanders and Jones their instructions. “He told me if anybody started out of the camps to halt them, and if they did not halt, to shoot them and make them stop.” Sanders explained that he only shot at a worker once in the few months he worked at the camp. “I didn’t know who he was; I could not tell whether I hit him or not, but I carried out my instructions and shot to hit.” Sanders reported that he personally witnessed the foreman, Martin Condon, shoot at two workers named Ed Leonard and “Red Shirt” when they ran away from the camp one night.

The Department of Justice agent deposing Sanders requested, “I wish you would explain just how you and the others were stationed on guard—that is where did you stand and where did the others stand, to keep people from escaping?” In Sander’s response he revealed a crucial aspect of peonage labor camps in the deep South: that employers and managers used the physical environment to retain labor in rural-industrial labor camps. “The way they had us stationed out, no one could pass; no one unless we were asleep or they swam the river. The river was one side and the mountain was on the other and nothing could go up it but a bird or some fowl of the air.” Sanders

went on to explain that foremen and guards arranged the tent quarters between the railroad right of way and the riverbank.

Often, the condition of peonage was fluid; men hired under the pretense of wage labor found themselves subjected to inhumane treatment from merciless bosses. The day after “Red Shirt” and the others escaped, the foreman, John McGee “went down towards Maryville hunting the men that got away, but he did not find them.” Sanders and another man, Ed Pool were discharged from their post as a guards, and the company fined them fifty dollars each for allowing the men to escape. Sanders and Pool both were forced to work on the railroad to pay off their debt. Sanders recalled that before the escape and his demotion and fine, he owed nothing to the company and that he never received any money while employed in the camp. Sanders then added, “When I was out on guard, Mr. Martin Condon told me that if I would let anybody get away he would kill me.”

Once trapped inside the camps, workers experienced violence as a signal part of the human and non-human landscape. Connie Sanders explained that outside Maryville that summer nearly all the workers were under guard and could not leave the camp without a pass, “and they can’t get a pass until they are out of debt.” Sanders witnessed Martin Condon strike Ed Forney with a pickaxe handle, forcing him to the ground and breaking Forney’s back so that he could not get up and walk. When officials asked one worker if he’d seen Condon mistreating men in the camp, he replied “Condon beat up people there and they moaned and groaned like anything...especially ‘Slim’...when he got through beating him it looked like his arm was broken and his head was bleeding.” When the official asked what Condon was beating him for, the man replied “he was beating all the men out to the cut [that] morning.”

Investigators asked if the workers saw dead bodies in the Maryville camps and the responses revealed that the natural features inside the camps often concealed but occasionally revealed the violence that occurred there. One day Sanders saw Brady chase two women and a man up the mountain, after they brought dinner to the men in his camp. "After that," Sanders explained, "we could smell something dead up there we believed to be the dead body of the boy Brady shot." The investigator asked if Sanders ever saw any bodies in the river. Sanders explained, "One evening it rained and the river rose a little, and just about dusk I saw a body come floating down the river, and a crowd of white people came down looking after it. They laid it on the rock and it stayed there until about six o'clock in the morning."

The Maryville camps revealed not only the use of debt and violence to coerce labor, but the use of black guards, the separation of workers by race within various camps, and the shared suffering of black and white labor. Sanders did not recall if the body in the river was white or black, but he reported another occasion in which the foremen fished a black man's body out of the river with a "trot line." When officials asked Will Kelly if he'd seen any "colored men floating down the river," he replied he had not, "but I heard of lots of them." Kelly then continued, "I saw one white man; they took him out just below us at the next camp." Workers of all colors and backgrounds met violence inside rural industrial labor camps, though owners manipulated ethnic and racial groups to enforce a subordinate labor force. Another black worker noted, "Just across the hill from us was a camp where they worked white men, between the mountain and the hill." He noted that the white men were locals and "not foreigners" when he explained that they often came into the black camp. "They knew all that was going on there, but they were stopped after a while from coming in." And then he

described an odd incident of biracial labor solidarity, “They [the whites] told us several times just to be patient and they would show us that this was a free country. They also said they were going to come down and wreck our camp on account of the bad treatment we were getting.”

At its core, debt peonage relies on violence; however, the peculiar and evolving manifestations of peonage in the twentieth century South also reflected the economic, political, and cultural forces associated with modern Progressive change. Connie Sanders’ testimony about the L&N railroad camps in Tennessee compares closely with multiple incidents of peonage labor camps investigated by the Department of Justice between 1905 and 1967 throughout the rural South. The industrial impulse of exploiting the rich natural resources of the rural South into profits for business relied upon recruiting and managing workers for the treacherous labor of turning islands, swamps, and forests into productive economic and ecological engines. Employers trafficked in labor, bringing men from as far away as New York City and Philadelphia south to places such as Brunswick Georgia, Miami, the Florida Keys, and to forest outposts such as Lockhart, Alabama and Maryville, Tennessee. Southern employers also recruited marginalized workers from within the south, enticing them by buying out their debts from previous employers, and threatening violence against workers who expressed a desire to quit. Transporting men and material across thousands of miles cost time and money, costs that were passed on to workers themselves through debt peonage regimes. Finally, once inside remote rural-industrial labor spaces, workers were physically guarded, beaten, chained, whipped, placed in cages, locked in holes dug in the forest floor, shot and killed, and buried in the same land they labored upon.

My research builds on Gunter Peck's call for viewing "geographies of labor," Jacqueline Jones' examination of the rural working poor in the postbellum South, and Mart A. Stewart's call for an emphasis on workers' primary relationship with their physical environment through "labor on the land." Workers in the rural industrial South engaged the physical environment largely through their exposure to landscapes and climate, yet they were also part of a global market economy dominated by employers' profit motives. Employers hired agencies to recruit desperate marginalized workers using idealistic rhetoric about the supposedly benign southern environment. Companies then brought workers into isolated places where foremen subjected them to harsh labor in terrible conditions. In order to retain laborers that repeatedly resisted such exploitation, foremen brutalized workers, and colluded with local law enforcement. Federal agents from the Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation were sporadic and inconsistent in their efforts to expose and prosecute labor agents and employers, and their inability to do so stemmed from the invisibility of the system and the reluctance of the state to interfere with industrial employers' interests. Ultimately market forces and federal initiatives freed most white and black southerners from the most extreme forms of peonage labor; however, undocumented immigrants continue to suffer under coercive labor regimes enforced through indebtedness and violence.¹

As an example of a working class environmental history, I approach workspaces and all the human and non-human natural phenomena at play in the labor camps. I

¹ Gunther Peck, "The Nature of Labor: Fault Lines and Common Ground in Environmental and Labor History," *Environmental History*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (April, 2006) 212-238; Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880-1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Jacqueline Jones, *Dispossessed: America's Underclasses from the Civil War to the Present*, (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Mart A. Stewart, "What Nature Suffers to Groe:" Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast 1680-1920 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996); Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California press, 2001).

define *Environment* expansively to include not only the topography of landscapes such as islands, oceans, forests, swamps, and rivers, as well as climate and weather, but also disease, vegetation and wildlife. I also include in this definition the human constructed spaces such as train cars, shacks, tents, sawmills, juke joints, and tomato fields. This study explores four cases of southern peonage work camps to show the effects of the landscape, weather, climate, and wildlife on working conditions of laborers inside the camps. Though Employers seemed to profess a Progressive or conservationist vision of utilizing natural resources, conflicts inside the camps did not stem from disagreements over land use, rather over the harsh character of the physical environment coupled with horrendous labor conditions. In each case, employers, workers, foremen, and reformers utilized environmental rhetoric to project their vision of opportunity or violence onto southern landscapes.

The enormous task of constructing the Florida East Coast Railway across the island seascape of the Florida Keys led industrialist Henry M. Flagler to hire labor agent Frank Sabia to recruit men from the urban North for the project. Sabia intentionally misrepresented the physical environment of the Keys, promising men skilled labor jobs in mild, pleasant surroundings because he was paid per head for those who he sent to the South. Workers who made the long, arduous trip encountered violent armed guards who locked them on trains, caged them on Miami piers, and forced them into treacherous island labor camps. Literally trapped on the Keys islands, men endured torrid heat, clouds of mosquitoes, and hostile labor bosses. They suffered injuries from pick axes, dynamite, poisonous plants and abusive guards. Many grew ill from exhaustion, dehydration, hunger, and disease. Workers consistently attempted and occasionally escaped from the islands with the help of local fishermen. Eventually in

1906, federal agents exposed the brutality, illness, and vice in the camps, though they failed to convict Frank Sabia for his part in indebting the men through transportation charges. Employers and recruiters expressed notions of environmental opportunity and man's ability to harness and transform nature for the betterment of society, but workers subjected to the toil and hardship in swamps and forests expressed their own sense of dehumanization and oppression in the context of the wilderness.

Almost simultaneously, inside E.E. Jackson's modern industrial lumber operation deep in the pine forests of southern Alabama, workers faced a similar but unique set of dangers related to the mixture of machinery and timber that fostered a more fluid set of human and non-human relationships. Like Flagler, Jackson relied on labor agents in New York and Philadelphia who recruited marginalized workers for labor constructing railroads and cutting trees outside the company town of Lockhart. The Jackson labor camps employed white Northerners, European immigrants, and southern black workers. The distinct physical environment of the forest when mixed with industrial profit motives and machinery, included integrated work teams, and created distinctly hazardous working conditions for all men in the camps. Men and animals suffered injuries from falling trees, fast, heavy logging trains, and sadistic bosses. They expressed their suffering through language that employed metaphors of men imprisoned by the wilderness and reduced to chattel. They viewed animals as workers, companions, and guards. And they likened bosses to the crude severity of the forest landscapes, whose inhumanity towards workers resembled the unpredictable instinctual violence of beasts, not men. Some workers escaped from the camps, often aided by the same dense forest foliage that they felt captive in, and eventually they notified federal authorities. The DOJ managed to convict the labor manager at

Lockhart, William S. Harlan, and several foremen for their crimes. However southern lumbermen convinced President Taft to commute Harlan's sentence. Local law enforcement consistently aided foremen in remanding workers and federal officials often ignored workers complaints, and chose not to prosecute southern employers for political reasons.

Like the Florida Keys and Alabama lumber camps, the Langdale Company's Georgia naval stores operations featured a system of peonage characterized by harsh labor, indebtedness, and violence. However, peonage in turpentine camps was more familiar to southern rural workers than the railroad and lumber camps were to immigrant labor. Both employers and law enforcement maintained that the turpentine industry must rely on peonage labor and ignored the conditions of indebtedness and violence. The federal programs of the New Deal and WWII commercial regulation fostered employer profits and left workers exposed to cyclical debt, poverty, and vagrancy.

Employers, foremen, and workers in the Langdale camps identified as part of a local "woodsmen" culture built on both informal and academic forest conservation. Turpentine workers, like their bosses, claimed they were also woodsmen, though many workers, and the Langdales themselves, acknowledged the extreme difficulty of turpentine labor and the system of peonage that plagued them. The tension between on the one hand, the pastoral notion of a labor force, personally drawn to the work of the pine drift, and on the other, the clear system of political and economic peonage designed to retain workers, constituted a central contradiction in the turpentine industry. The larger global market forces of speculative finance and foreign competition eventually led to the decline of the turpentine industry and the labor camps after the Second World

War; however, workers continued to suffer even greater economic and physical insecurity inside other commercial agriculture labor camps.

The Langdale turpentine camps and tomato growers in Immokalee, Florida both profited from commercial agriculture. Such large operations were part of a volatile ecological system, and pressured by competition from foreign producers who had lower labor costs. Owners in both cases expressed the difficulty posed by a dynamic climate as well as their reliance on cheap labor that they considered a unique social group for their poverty and vulnerability. Unlike the families who often lived and worked in turpentine camps their whole life, vegetable workers migrated throughout the eastern region of the U.S., and suffered greater housing, food, and health insecurity. Like the naval stores industry, commercial vegetable growers benefited from a state government that maintained low taxes and possessed little regulatory power, as well as an indifferent federal government that did little to protect migrant farm workers. In the 1960s, television and print media, workers themselves, and civil rights activists exposed abuses in the migrant farm labor system. Economic changes and federal legislation rendered extinct the worst kinds of peonage labor; however, even today undocumented workers continue to suffer the abuses of peonage labor regimes.

Each individual case of peonage labor in this study is unique to its environmental, social, and political context. Yet, the profit motives of employers, the physical isolation of workers, the brutality of foremen, workers vulnerability to the environment, as well as their resilience, the acquiescence of law enforcement, and external market forces all shaped peonage labor regimes throughout the rural industrial South. The rise of industrial capitalism in the late nineteenth century brought enormous wealth and power to men who benefited from market speculation, lax federal oversight,

and a demographic dislocation. The profit motives of employers like Flagler, Jackson, and the Langdale family relied upon cheap labor. Industrialists benefited from immigration policies fueling enormous labor surpluses in the North. All southern rural and extractive employers benefited from land consolidation and an impoverished regional migrant labor force displaced from tenant farms by bankers, boll weevils, and bad federal farm policies. The shortage of capital throughout the South led industry titans to promote their operations as opportunities for individuals to earn a wage, for southern states to generate revenue and develop their industrial infrastructure, and for the national economy to expand more broadly.

Rural industrial employers saw themselves as Progressives in the sense that they were dedicated to the idea of efficient use of natural resources. Each of the employers who managed rural industrial labor systems believed that through scientific management of labor and utilization of new technology they could make production more efficient, and develop isolated natural resources for the improvement of the local and national economy and society. Some argued that increasing rail access to isolated areas improved commerce, while others promoted academic forestry principles of 'wise use' and sustainability. Most saw themselves as improving society through economic development and yet in the process their operations often relied on the violent exploitation of their workers.

Workers inside rural industrial labor systems suffered physical isolation from national political, social, and cultural institutions. Whether recently arrived ethnic European immigrants, unemployed urban Americans, or southern black workers, individuals fell subject to peonage labor abuses because they were vulnerable to exploitative employers, manipulative recruiters, and violent foremen, especially once

they were far from their families and unable to report companies' abuses. On the tropical islands, inside forests, or on vast vegetable farms, workers had few comforts or protections. In each case the physical environment facilitated employers' ability to exploit labor and cloaked the violence and suffering they experienced from the natural and constructed conditions inside the camps. Not until reformers ventured into the camps could the plight of workers be exposed.

The lack of infrastructure in the rural south and the great distance from cities meant that workers suffered from exposure to the elements and poor provisions inside peonage labor camps. Whether traveling days without food or water, being forced to sleep on rocky ground, or suffering terrible injuries from heavy timber and hot sun, workers' relationship with the environment of the rural south can largely be characterized as one of misery. Poor and spoiled food, contaminated water, lack of medical care, and festering insects tormented men inside rural industrial labor spaces. Most workers interviewed stated these environmental troubles as their reason for resisting the work regimes and desiring to return home.

When workers resisted, bosses beat them, tied them to trees, or shot them. Some mostly suffered from hard labor exacerbated by extreme poverty and an inability to escape the cyclical debt that ensnared them. Nonetheless they expressed their oppression in language that emphasized their hardship and resilience within the swamps and forests of the rural South.

Many workers resisted their condition by protesting to foremen, trying to run away or simply taking what chance they could to escape from the torment they faced in the camps. In railroad camps and lumber operations workers demanded release and when denied they defied bosses and escaped anyway they could, stealing away on fishing

boats, or absconding in the night. In turpentine and vegetable farms workers often sought the most benevolent employer or the best wage offered by a crew boss. Many who faced debt peonage and violence in the camps looked for employment in neighboring farms or escaped in hopes of evading foremen and returning home to their families. Even for those workers who remained inside the camps for extended periods, the lack of more wholesome forms of entertainment replaced by the culture of drinking, gambling, and fighting manifested as self-destructive attempts to relieve suffering, gain financially, or exert personal power within a system that allowed them very little if any respite from hard labor.

Ultimately the collusion, indifference, or impotence of legal authorities to protect workers from peonage labor regimes reinforced employers' designs to ensnare workers through debt and violence. When workers managed to escape and complain to authorities, many learned the hard way that local sheriffs were practically the security enforcement for the camp. Often, sheriffs deputized employers and foremen, handing over their legal authority to enforce the law to those who stood to profit from illegally exploiting workers. Even at the federal level, when officials within the Department of Justice or the Federal Bureau of Investigation investigated peonage labor abuses or sought to prosecute violators, the broader political system often avoided confronting southern employers either because they lacked sufficient evidence for trial or because the employers held political power through their collective industrial organization. Even though the records indicate that workers continually escaped peonage labor camps and over time technology made the most extreme forms of repression more visible, marginalized groups continued to be vulnerable to peonage abuses. Thus the private-public system of exploitation amounted to a revolving door for marginalized workers.

In the rural South, physical isolation or the lack of legal protection, facilitated peonage labor even as other forms of indebted coercive labor faded into history.

Chapter One:

Labor, Immigration, and Environmental Historiography

In the late 1980s, scholars of the “New Labor History” carried out a major turn in the substance of debates on working class culture. Moving away from the consensus school of the post-war era, Herbert Gutman, David Montgomery and many others on both sides of the Atlantic sought to understand the cultural values and intellectual debates that informed America’s working classes in the late nineteenth century. In the 1990s, a distinctly younger though increasingly active group of environmental historians began debating how analyses of the role of nature in history could contribute to and expand the fields of social and labor history. In the last two decades a number of historians argued for merging environmental and labor history. Scholars such as Richard White, Gunther Peck, Karl Jacoby, and Mart A. Stewart are paving the way for new scholarship that addresses the role of class division and the relationship between human and non-human nature. Though early Labor and Environmental historians focused on the Northeast and Western United States, many argue that the U.S. South represents an important area of study in addressing the various ways in which employers and workers identified themselves and engaged one another within the context of rural-industrial labor spaces²

Building on the seminal work of British social historian E.P. Thompson, both Herbert Gutman and David Montgomery began to focus on the culture and experience

² David Montgomery, “Trends in Working-Class History” *Labour/Le Travail*, Vol. 19, (Spring, 1987), 13-22; Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-class and Social History* (New York: Vintage 1977); David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995); Stewart, “*What Nature Suffers to Groe*,” 13-16.

of American workers in every day life. They challenged earlier binary class orientations of rich and poor, showing that divisions in ethnicity, intellectual debates, and political ideologies characterized the labor struggles of the Gilded Age in North America. New Labor historians largely focused on eastern United States industrial centers such as Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Patterson, New Jersey. Their emphasis on “structures of power” countered notions that industrial capital easily dominated the daily lives of poor, ethnic-migrant working class people. Montgomery worked to synthesize workers’ culture and the labor struggles they participated in. Gutman sought to parse out the role of the community and the impact of the working classes on larger society. The New Labor historians pushed boundaries of interpretation, illustrated new methodological approaches, and revealed previously hidden source material. They built what they argued was a more adept history of American workers, their cultures, lifestyles, and reactions to the industrial order.³

The shift in approaching labor history through cultural rather than political methods influenced scholars of the early twentieth century to highlight working class communities as their central focal point. This led to an expansion of literature dealing with ethnic diversity and the role of immigrant communities in the modern expansionist-industrial United States. Building on earlier works of John Higham and Barbara Miller Solomon dealing with immigration and Nativism, John Bodnar, Donna Gabaccia, and Ewa Marawska demonstrated the particular aspirations of Southern and Eastern European immigrants, as well as the social discrimination they encountered in industrial urban centers of the U.S. Scholars such as Elizabeth Ewen and Matthew Frye

³ David Montgomery, “Trends in Working-Class History” *Labour/Le Travail*, Vol. 19, (Spring, 1987), 13-22; Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society* (1977); Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor* (1987).

Jacobson expanded studies of immigration and racial and gender ideologies when they built upon Gutman's interest in the everyday lives of workers and their impact on larger society. From different approaches, both Ewen and Jacobsen provided crucial insight into the character of immigration in the early 20th century United States. They highlighted the connection among industrial economic expansion, increased immigration, and the consequences of dynamic markets and hierarchies of ethnicity that they argued undergirded America's social and economic order.⁴

Ewen's intervention built upon the Gutman school by employing the method of gender studies, further complicating notions of monolithic economic classes and ethnic groups. She highlighted the experience of Jewish and Italian immigrant women and children, aiming to place them at the "center of the historical stage." Ewen detailed women and children's particular experience in moving from agrarian, preindustrial rural Europe to the industrial urban centers of the United States. She argued that the process of immigration involved both change and continuity in migrants' cultural values and behaviors. Immigrant women maintained their traditions and institutions, even as they adapted to the dynamism of cash economies and fluctuating employment opportunities. Children growing up in the United States navigated the process of assimilation more easily than did their mothers. Ewen utilized oral histories and personal autobiographies to bring to life the women who served at the center of Americas' modernization.

⁴ John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955); Barbara Miller Solomon's *Ancestors and Immigrants: A Changing New England Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956); Donna Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984); Ewa Morawska, *For Bread with Butter: The Life-Worlds of East Central European Immigrants in Johnstown, Pennsylvania 1890-1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a different color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); also; *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000).

Immigrant women struggled to overcome the ethnic discrimination and labor exploitation that characterized the industrial labor market of the early 20th century United States.⁵

Matthew Frye Jacobson's crucial scholarship on race and empire in the United States connected Montgomery and Gutman's work (which focused on local communities and labor movements) to broader transnational and global industrial systems. Jacobson linked theories of race to immigration history by explaining the conflicted relationship Gilded Age Americans had with immigrants in a rapidly industrializing economy. Manufacturers relied on liberal immigration policy to secure large pools of cheap labor in order to drive down wages, increase production, expand exports, and ultimately improve profit margins. Thus business interests viewed immigrants as necessary for the security of the U.S. economy. However, many workers and middle class reformers viewed foreigners with cultural suspicion, arguing their ethnic difference represented a threat to the Anglo-Saxon, republican virtues that, along with open frontiers, created and sustained democratic institutions. Many Americans worried that Slavic and Polish people's ethnicity and cultural baggage signified they cared only about America's jobs, not its Protestant values or democratic principles. American workers' fears about competition in saturated labor markets generated resentment toward immigrant workers; however, Jacobson argued racial conflict emerged out of more than simple anti-immigrant anger.⁶

Jacobson demonstrated that employers' notions of racial difference influenced their designs to sustain large pools of diverse labor throughout the United States. After

⁵ Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985).

⁶ Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues; The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000) 63-68.

the 1885 Alien Contract Labor Law forbidding importation of contract laborers, U.S. business relied on European ethnic *padrones*, living in the U.S. to direct their own countrymen into industrial jobs in America, often garnering tidy profits at the expense of workers' safety. Employers promoted the idea of ethnic and racial differences for "engineering a workforce that was usefully divided against itself." Jacobson also presented racial theories as influencing "discussions of immigrants' place in the New World Industrial order." Employers fretted over white workers' inability to match Asian fruit picking skills in California's orchards. Many attributed Italians' and Jews' adaptability to different jobs as a unique racial trait, which made them more suitable for America's highly volatile labor market. Jacobson effectively related labor and immigration histories by demonstrating that immigrants contributed greatly to the rising U.S. industrial state abroad, and depending upon one's perspective, either suffered or represented the "ugliest features of corporate capitalism amid rapid industrialization" in America. This transnational shift in perspectives of labor and immigration in America allowed an expansion of conceptual frameworks of histories of labor and immigration that incorporated the American west into Labor history.⁷

Gunther Peck, in his *Reinventing Free Labor* (2000) pushed histories of immigration, labor, and the environment to envision the transnational, and intra-ethnic class relations of *padrones*, immigrant laborers, and the geography of the North American West. Peck explored what he called the "unstable fiction" of free labor in the industrial northwestern United States. *Padrones* on both U.S. borders in Mexico and Canada, in connection with partners in Italy, Greece, and Mexico funneled immigrant workers from their own countries to the mines of the Rocky Mountains. Peck asserted

⁷ Ibid, 79-73.

that these *padrones* were “modern” capitalists in that they manipulated bureaucratic systems, western geography, and laborers of their own ethnicity in order to profit. Mine operators violently coerced workers in order to increase production. Peck emphasized workers’ resistance, picking up on earlier trends in immigration history by focusing on community formation, labor practices, and gender construction. Peck suggested that immigration and labor historians needed to shift focus spatially from settled immigrant communities to mobile transient migrant workers. Peck skillfully mingled methodologies to show areas where new interpretations exposed previously unseen patterns in labor, immigration, and environmental histories.⁸

In 2006, Peck wrote an essay that sought to identify key areas for mutual analysis between labor and environmental historians. Pointing out the Marxist underpinnings of William Cronon’s early work, Peck charged that assertions of humans’ “alienation” from nature skewed the reality that humans are part of nature. He posited that non-human nature and human work could be better synthesized to account for their interconnectivity. Peck saw that few labor historians were using methods that viewed the natural environment as central to their focus. Environmental historians on the other hand dealt with “class” only peripherally. He suggested that studies of place, such as the North Western United States, and processes such as forms of human labor might help historians of both fields move beyond the declension narratives of capitalist commodification of nature. Peck framed his vision in terms of “geographies of labor,” which he believed would reveal connections between urban and rural landscapes, ethnic communities, and socio-economic classes. He argued that most environmental histories largely operated in a unidirectional fashion, focusing only on humans’ impact on nature,

⁸ Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor* (2000).

and he raised the plausibility of examining the inverse relationship of nonhuman nature's impact on humans. Peck further suggested that: "connections between nature and labor remain conceptually imbedded in extractive mining and agricultural contexts." Peck's vision pulled from debates taking place within the field of environmental history itself, which sought to find new conceptual frameworks for further analysis.⁹

As two of the founders of environmental history, William Cronon and Donald Worster came to their vision of existing unsustainable ecological relationships within the context of wider social and political critiques of capitalist market economics. Their methodological trail blazing borrowed heavily from Marxist analysis of man's alienation from land and natural resources. Cronon's *Changes in the Land* (1976) marked the beginning of Environmental History, arguing that European market intervention in North America began a destabilization of ecological systems that continues to the present day and jeopardizes human livelihood. Cronon's narrative followed the transformation whereby indigenous Americans' interconnection with nature was interrupted and replaced by English settlers' systematic maximizing of material resources for profits. The English cleared forests previously used by natives for hunting grounds; encouraged the fur trade that nearly extinguished beaver populations; and grew monocultures that exhausted the soil, perpetuating unending expansion. Though he looked at both native and settler systems of agriculture and hunting, labor was not a central component of Cronon's thesis. Rather, it was the decline of pre-industrial sustainable ecological relationships under the expansionist, materialist colonial regime

⁹ Gunther Peck, "The Nature of Labor: Fault Lines and Common Ground in Environmental and Labor History," *Environmental History*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (April, 2006) 212-238.

that concerned him most. Cronon argued capitalism caused the irreversible changes of North American landscapes and ecologies.¹⁰

In *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (1977), Donald Worster examined the complex relationship between ecology as a science and its cultural and conceptual underpinnings. Subsequently his *Dust Bowl* (1979) focused on the unsustainable agricultural practices and failed government intervention that contributed to the infamous drought and dust storms on the southwestern plains. Worster argued that a "capitalist ethos" led humans to destroy the grass and bison that sustained human life in the region. Though he described the poverty and hardship suffered by 'Okies' and elites who promoted the commercial "agribusiness" model of farming, Worster viewed all the southwest plains farmers as perpetuators of a "common economic culture" that destroyed the soil. He asserted that greed drove sod-busting settlers to plow up the soil until there was nothing left but dust. Worster did not seek to examine complexities of class divisions at length, asserting that only the original indigenous inhabitants had respect for the natural balance on which the plains ecosystem relied. Even the agricultural reforms of the 1930s did not change what Worster viewed as the fundamental problem of commercial agriculture. Worster employed an almost apocalyptic tone in his description of the impact of dust storms on people's lives. And though he built on Cronon's anti-capitalist thesis, his emphasis on materialist frameworks for explaining the crisis left some to question the sustainability of environmental history as a field.¹¹

¹⁰ William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

¹¹ Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

After more than a decade of discussion and exposition, by the 1990s Environmental historians established a substantial space for themselves in the scholarly community. Both Cronon and Worster began to look for ways to further expand environmental methods and to legitimize the field within the broader scholarly community. Cronon's 1990 article "Modes of Prophecy and Production" argued for settling what he believed was Worster's limited "agro-ecological" mode of production problem method. Worster suggested that Marx's notion of "Modes of Production" which referred to physical methods of human work, or divisions of labor (particularly in agricultural food production) were the central unifying relationship between humans of all civilizations and societies since the Neolithic Revolution. He further argued that environmental historians' greatest challenge was tracing the capitalist transformation of the fifteenth century that made land into a commodity, and how it changed ecological systems. Cronon argued Worster's emphasis on "agro-ecological modes of production" was excessively materialist, and did not appropriately account for disparity in human belief regarding their relationship to the environment, or integrate ideology and political economy into environmental history. Cronon called for the establishment of a new, and more useable framework for viewing the role of nature in human life historically. Asserting that there was not enough "ideology" in environmental history, he suggested that "relationships" were a more flexible tool for viewing natural systems and the human cultures and political economies they existed within. In viewing capitalism's commodification of land, he extended the question "who has gained and who has lost power as modes of production have changed?" Cronon and Worster's mutual interest in expanding environmental history was based on further linking the field with

other fields of history to understand humans' place on earth and the many ways people and nature have shaped each other.¹²

Cronon's second book *Nature's Metropolis* (1991) incorporated his evolving views of environmental history by linking economies and nature in a particular place. Focusing on Chicago in the late nineteenth century, Cronon viewed the development of the city as a result of its ecological hyperactivity. He emphasized the interconnectivity of humans and non-human nature in Chicago with those in the rural hinterlands of the mid-west farming region. Placing more emphasis on cultural ideology in his narrative, Cronon examined how humans re-envisioned economic relationships to create new market systems such as stock "futures," which further economized the flow of corn, and grain from farms to market and back again. Chicago represented a hub, where both human conceptual and technological innovation relied on ecological landscapes to produce a level of material abundance previously unseen in human history. Cronon described "first nature" as the natural resources humans processed into commercial products such as timber cut and shipped from the northern forests of Michigan along rivers and sawed into boards inside lumber mills. Humans then cut and shipped lumber, Cronon's "second nature," to factories and farms by horse-powered wagons, and later by coal powered trains, where manufacturers made furniture, and farmers used lumber to build barns, grain silos and to furnish more comfortable domestic spaces. Linking consumption to conservation, Cronon argued that the wealth created in what he called

¹² Donald Worster, "Transformations of the Earth: Toward an Agroecological Perspective in History," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (March, 1990) 1087-1106; William Cronon, "Modes of Prophecy and Production: Placing Nature in History," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (March, 1990) 1122-1131.

nature's metropolis allowed modern humans the comfort and efficiency to re-envision their role in, and impact on, the environment.¹³

The 1990s was a decade of expansion and shifting perspectives for the field of environmental history. Building on Cronon and Worster's debate over the future of the field, Richard White took a significant step forward, altering the narrative from one of declension to one of interconnectivity and adaptation. Moving beyond Marxist analyses, White posited that, not only should man be viewed as part of nature, but that energy, man, and industrial production could not be separated from the natural organic processes that supported them. As a historical study of the Columbia River, White's *Organic Machine* (1995) incorporated environmental and intellectual history that followed the waterway from the days of indigenous salmon fishing through the dam building, and nuclear power facilities of the modern era. Accounting for the "cultural perceptions" of nature that shifted over time, White used the writings of Emerson and Kipling to reveal how the many uses of the river made it a social space. He pointed to the "geography of energy" whereby mountains, sun, salmon, Indians, canneries, and nuclear power plants all harnessed the organic energy of the river for one purpose or another. White viewed the environmental changes in the river not as man defeating nature, but as various organisms engaging and converting its energy while they could. His thesis integrated William Cronon's notion of "first" and "second" nature by accepting nuclear power plants and hydroelectric dams as equally a part of "nature" as

¹³ William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: Norton Press, 1991) 27-30, 128-131, 152-153.

the salmon and river flows from which they developed. However, White's central organizing theme is energy, which all organisms create and utilize in common.¹⁴

Employing Richard White's model of the organic machine, Douglas Sackman incorporated labor into his picture of southern California's citrus industry. Sackman viewed workers' bodies as mediums between the organic landscapes of the groves and the artificial space of the market. He also emphasized tropes of culture and nature, whereby racial stereotypes played into which ethnic groups growers wanted to pick their crops and why. Chinese pickers had cultural expertise from their labor in fruit plantations throughout the Pacific Rim. However, after the 1892 Exclusion Act, Euro-American pickers took over, and the delicate care Chinese workers showed for the fragile orange skins diminished and employers need to increase quality and production led to the employment of scientific management in the orange groves, which trained workers to handle the fruit to maximize profits. But new labor management regimes eroded the physical and psychological health of workers, by subjecting them to fumigation chemicals and increasing the power of foremen over their work routine. This transformation of nature—in the form of oranges and workers' bodies—emphasized Worster's "agro-ecological" mode of production analysis and borrowed from White's notion of organic machines. Sackman emphasized human labor in his narrative and exposed how both the use of technology and human hands contributed to increased commercial profits in the citrus industry.¹⁵

Further shifts in Environmental historical methods adapted to Cronon's question of who benefited from changes in human relationships with the environment.

¹⁴ Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

¹⁵ Douglas C. Sackman, "'Natures' Workshop': The Environment and Workers' Bodies in California's Citrus Industry 1900-1940," *Environmental History*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (January, 2000) 27-53.

In his 1997 article “Class and Environmental History,” Karl Jacoby provided a coherent vision of working class environmental history by complicating overly simplistic groupings of working class and environmental social movements. Jacoby showed that working class folks were not always allied with environmental conservation. Urban elites’ plans for conservation often conflicted with rural local “moral ecologies” that viewed open use of nature as a means of subsistence. The “atmosphere of class hatred” that Jacoby saw in conflicts between backwoodsmen and game officials moved beyond previous trends in Environmental history. Accepting Gunther Peck’s analysis, Jacoby argued that environmental history largely avoided class and he further asserted that labor historians led by Gutman and Montgomery overcame inaccurate homogenizations of working class humans but did not account for environmental relationships. Environmental historians such as Andrew Hurley and Robert Gottlieb accepted the “class assumptions of conservationists” when they emphasized the links between industrial labor movements and the environmental movement. Shifting to wilderness spaces in an earlier period, Jacoby focused on laboring classes that challenged environmental ideologies of nature conservation.¹⁶

Jacoby’s 2001 monograph, *Crimes Against Nature*, deftly comingled issues of class and culture into his examination of 20th century conservation movements and the attempt to regulate hunting, fishing, and timber use in New York’s Adirondack Mountains, California’s Yellowstone National Park, and Arizona’s Grand Canyon. Jacoby moved beyond the work of Mark David Spence and Louis Warren, which largely

¹⁶ Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary Indiana, 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing The Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1993); Karl Jacoby, “Class and Environmental History: Lessons from ‘The War in the Adirondacks,’” *Environmental History*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (July, 1997) 324-342.

focused on race and ethnicity as cultural divisions between conservationists and indigenous populations. Using class as his central organizing theme, Jacoby viewed conservation efforts as “resource allocation” whereby urban elites imposed their ideologies of land use on a local rural folks living off of the land. Local people’s “moral ecology” included the notion of “common rights” to land use. Pivoting from earlier overly simplistic tropes of Marxism in environmental history, Jacoby showed how notions of “environmental banditry,” when viewed through a more nuanced conceptual framework, can challenge assumptions about how class, labor, and the environment interconnect. Through his three case studies of local residents vs. government officials, Jacoby offered a fresh and nuanced vision of how social conflict between working class and urban elites developed out of evolving environmental ideologies.¹⁷

Following Jacoby, Gunther Peck famously proposed new interventions in environmental history that appropriately dealt with class, labor, physical spaces, and relationships between human work and non-human nature throughout history. It is odd that Peck suggested there could be room for “class analysis” in Environmental history nearly a decade after Jacoby first offered a clear example of how such an analysis might look. Equally odd is Peck’s call for scholars to focus on questions of “place” and “process” fifteen years after Cronon’s *Nature’s Metropolis*. But Peck’s insistence on the need for work that examines how class is spatially organized remains both a truly insightful proposition and an underdeveloped area of research. Peck pointed out that there was a need for historical research that shows the specific relationships among

¹⁷ Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing The Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Louis S. Warren, *The Hunter’s Game: Poachers and Conservationists in Twentieth Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California press, 2001).

markets, nature, and class interests. Jacoby's examination of how social groups of people divided themselves over evolving ideologies of land use leaves room for further studies that incorporate these relationships.¹⁸

Both Jacoby and Peck have called for examinations of the South, particularly the connections among agriculture, land enclosure, and labor markets. Gunther Peck pointed out in his article, "*The Nature of Labor*," that the rural South provides common ground for studies of labor and environment that incorporate class conflict around the rural agricultural and industrial sectors. Room remains for studies that attempt to unwind the relationships among social, racial, and environmental ideologies to identify how human consumption of nature contributed to class divisions within southern society. Further study of rural industrial labor spaces offers one potential pathway toward what Gunther Peck and William Cronon called for in their groundbreaking historiographic essays: histories that deal with the role of the environment in class divisions. Merging labor and environmental history through analysis of southern rural-industrial labor spaces allows the possibility to move beyond the dominating trope of conservationist and Marxist declension narratives that dominate environmental history to a study that examines human/non-human relationships and the evolving racial and class divisions of the modern South.

The overwhelming majority of industrial labor in the post-bellum South went toward extracting natural resources in isolated rural spaces. Employers faced the imperative of finding, transporting, and maintaining pools of labor to carry out the brutal and dangerous work of building railroads, chopping trees, mining coal and phosphates, and picking crops. Often, labor recruiters and employers manipulated and

¹⁸ Gunther Peck, "The Nature of Labor," 212-238.

extorted workers in order to attract them to and retain them in such difficult jobs. The rural South offers unique context for examining the role of human consumption of non-human nature in cultural ideologies and class divisions.¹⁹

Coercive and Indebted Labor and Extractive Industries in the New South

In the post-bellum South, both conservatives who sought the “redemption” of the South from Radical Republicans, and reformers who hoped to modernize southern economic and social systems agreed; In order to build a new economy, state government and private capital needed to command labor for agricultural and extractive industrial production. Converting the immense and diverse array of natural resources contained within the eleven former Confederate states into marketable commodities required an enormous amount of labor. Cotton lands needed cultivation and harvesting. Coal, iron ore, and phosphate required extraction. Forests had to be cleared, and farms, towns, and railroad tracks put in their place. The combination of industrialization, economic expansion, and southern cultural legacies of white supremacist racial ideology contributed to the creation of what some scholars identify as a new hybrid form of forced labor throughout the post-bellum South referred to as *peonage*. Indebted or coercive labor systems ensnared poor southerners, both black and white, as well as newly arrived European, Asian, and eventually Mexican immigrants. In the new South, farming on a “crop lien” system, laboring on chain gangs, and borrowing from the company store became central aspects of relations between workers, landowners, and employers. The development of peonage labor regimes was rooted in both old and new social, economic,

¹⁹ Pete Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972) 105-110; Jones, *Dispossessed: America's Underclasses from the Civil War to the Present*, (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Daniel Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name, The Re-enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Double Day, 2008).

and political mechanisms at work in the modern South and it varied across space and time. However, the wider undercapitalization of the South, ethnic and racial ideologies of white supremacy, and environmental ideologies of conservation, as well as personal sadistic impulses and immediate financial profit motives underpinned peonage labor regimes across the South.²⁰

Scholarly attention to peonage, as a subset of the wider occurrence of coerced labor systems in the post-bellum South, remain underdeveloped compared with the historical literature on sharecropping, convict labor, and company towns. Roughly one in three farm laborers in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi in the post-bellum era found themselves subject to peonage labor practices. Peonage predominantly occurred in railroad construction camps, the naval stores industry, and commercial vegetable farms. Both federal investigators looking into complaints of this new form of slavery, and employers who utilized physical force to retain workers used the term *peonage* to describe the status of workers coerced through debt or violence to remain working against their will. Federal investigators in the early 20th century struggled to prove the involuntary status of workers in the isolated rural South. Peonage labor develop among other debt labor regimes such as convict labor, company town “paternalism,” and sharecropping, though it differed from each of these. Historians should distinguish the status of peons from consenting tenants or reluctant underpaid farm laborers. The dynamic physical environments where coerced labor systems operated offer important information about the phenomenon of peonage labor in the South. An attention to

²⁰ See C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951); also Gavin Wright, *Old South New South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Sate University Press, 1986); Robert Outland, *Tapping the Pines: The Naval Stores Industry in the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004).

relationships among employers, laborers and the physical environment will add to a better understanding of southern peonage labor systems.²¹

C. Vann Woodward, the preeminent historian of the post-reconstruction South, famously argued that the alliance of elite conservative Democrats such as General William Mahone, media boosters such as Henry Waterson, and northern capital investors such as J.P. Morgan created a “tributary economy” in the South. Woodward points to undercapitalization as the dominant economic characteristic throughout the region, arguing that most southern states possessed significant natural resources but lacked the capital, and often the labor, to transform them into financial wealth. Southern boosters and northern industry magnates carried out the expansion of railroads by employing “blacks and whites who cut and graded and bridged their way across the Appalachians and the Piedmont, through the steaming delta and swamp of the Gulf region, the arid Texas plains, and the scrub and hammock of Florida to link the subtropics with the temperate zone.” Railroads allowed for the subsequent increase in extractive industries such as lumber, which between 1880 and 1900 increased in production value from 1.7 to 17.4 million dollars. This extractive economy relied heavily on “low wage, low value industries” and often employed coerced laborers such as convicts and peons to do the initial rough processing of material before it was transported to the Northern factories for finishing.²²

In 1986, Gavin Wright countered Woodward’s thesis of change after Reconstruction, using economic history to show that the South had always been cash poor, resource rich, and distinct from the North in its low wage economy for black and

²¹ Jones, *Dispossessed* (1992); Pete Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South 1901-1969* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972).

²² C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951) 112-121.

white workers. Though Wright agreed with Woodward that the post-bellum South had a “colonial economy,” he argued that scholars overemphasized the idea of post-Reconstruction change. Wright asserted that both finance and labor systems always relied heavily on poorly paid and coerced labor in order to profit. Southern elites preferred coercive labor systems to the development of large populations of working poor laborers with discretionary money because it reinforced a racial caste system they believed their social order depended upon. The isolation of the South’s labor force, both under the slave regime and after the war, facilitated the low wage economy and coercive labor regimes. Wright argued that distance and isolation from markets characterized both old and new southern economies; in his view, local and regional labor migration patterns always distinguished the South from the rest of the United States.

Jacqueline Jones’ *Disspossessed: America’s Underclasses From the Civil War to the Present* (1992), contributed mightily to histories of labor and class in the postbellum South. Employing extensive research and an expansive critique of race and poverty in the U.S., Jones argued that post-industrial American cultural portrayals of the “underclass” as primarily urban and African-American misconstrue the actual history of poverty. Comparing emancipated black southerners after the Civil War and poor white southerners she posited that rural southerners of both races were not lazy or shiftless, a charge leveled at them by employers and landlords who resented high labor turnover, but rather they shared values of hard work and resilience. Jones deftly examined many central themes in southern labor histories, chiefly: the overwhelming existence of class division based on land ownership; the relegation of rural workers to sharecropping, extractive industries, and migrant labor; the exploitation of workers through indebtedness and coercive labor; the resilience and mobility or “shifting” workers

embodied in their attempts to avoid exploitation; and the systematic political oppression of the working poor. Unlike earlier works on political economy and labor in the South, Jones was one of the first to focus on the daily lives of poor rural workers bringing scholars closer to the reality of her historical actors.²³

Jones' careful attention to and poignant description of workers' experience in the cotton fields, phosphate mines, and vegetable farms provides an invaluable narrative of life and labor in southern rural-industrial labor spaces. Her argument that "place" has a role in the history of poverty is most important. Not only was the lack of land ownership or a 'home place' a major factor in the poverty and disfranchisement of rural workers, "wage earning was contingent on the forces of nature, always variable and unpredictable." Along the roads from the countryside to the cities, poor Americans performed "hard work in the fields" and "hard living in town." Whether the "backbreaking rigors of stoop labor" or the exorbitant rents paid to greedy slumlords in the ghetto, isolation of marginalized peoples has always reinforced their suffering. Jones' monograph represents one of most influential analyses of southern rural labor in the industrial U.S. South.²⁴

Nan Woodruff argued in *American Congo* (2003), that modern southern economies were bound to external forces through global cotton, iron, and rice markets. Northern states' and European nations' capital investment drew immigrant labor to southern agriculture and industry as well. Woodruff, like Wright and Woodward, likened the brutality of coerced labor in the "alluvial empire" of the Mississippi Delta to a bureaucratic "colonial" regime. Though she employed a more transnational conceptual

²³ Jones, *Dispossessed*. 167-178.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

framework, she argued that this regime, which exploited black southerners and immigrant laborers in order to profit in a global market system, bore similarities to that of the Belgian Congo. Global market imperatives and southern white supremacist legal customs reinforced convict and peonage labor systems in order to underwrite much of the economic expansion in the modern South.²⁵

The most pervasive form of indebted labor in the post-bellum South was sharecropping. Building on the Progressive school in American history and the Materialist approach of Charles Beard, in 1939, Roger W. Shugg published his *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana*. The book outlined the phenomena of the “crop lien” system as the primary mechanism through which landed elites maintained the plantation system, binding black and white farmers to the land through debt and threat of violence. The loss of slave property and the destruction of yeoman homesteads during the Civil War meant that in order to maintain ownership of land after the war planters and small farmers had to borrow on credit to cultivate cotton and sugar. Nearly four out of five cotton farmers took out a lien on their crop for seed and supplies after the crop failures of 1867. Plantation owners held onto their property only by borrowing from merchants and subdividing and renting out their estates. Most small white farmers did not want to work for landlords, but “the multitude who wanted small tracts had no money to pay for them.” Thus most farmers took to tenancy and farming “on halves” in an effort to survive and hopefully move up the agricultural ladder from sharecropping to renting, and eventually owning their own farms. Shugg asserted that: “the crop lien became universal” and the “extortion and risk of this system of credit...plunged a

²⁵ Gavin Wright, *Old South New South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986) 11-13; 53-56; 159; Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2003) 32-33.

majority of the rural population into debt from which there was little hope of escape.” Shugg largely left out southern blacks’ crucial role in the development of the sharecropping system, assuming that blacks lacked social and economic power because they were merely a “racial caste, not a social group.” Shugg himself later admitted the fallacy of his assertion and suggested that future scholars would correct this mistake.²⁶

Though the overwhelming majority of sharecroppers and tenant farmers across the South were white, proportionally more blacks than whites were relegated to this form of debt peonage. In *Good and Faithful Labor: From Slavery to Sharecropping in the Natchez District 1860-1890*, (1977) Ronald L.F. Davis made the case that freedmen in the post-emancipation Louisiana delta contributed to the development of the sharecropping system. Union officials and northern capitalists recognized the need to jumpstart agricultural production after the Civil War, and, as a result, Union military and Republican legislators dashed freedmen’s hopes of massive land redistribution and private land grants. However, southern blacks rejected the notion of “wage” or gang labor because it resembled the slave labor regime. Davis argues that freedmen negotiated for tenancy and farming on shares, as this system granted them some nominal independence from white landlords and overseers. In the same year, cliometricians Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch characterized sharecropping as a “compromise” between freedmen and planters. Landlords employed tenants in order to maintain their family estates, and along with merchants, designed the crop lien system to favor their need for profits. Julie Saville used Davis’s method to analyze blacks’ transition from slave to wage labor in South Carolina. As part of the resistance school of

²⁶ Roger W. Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1939), 235-239; 264-266. See also Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

African-American studies in the 1990s, Saville posited that low-country freedmen asserted demands for their own land and control of their time and labor away from white oversight. The regional characteristics of the low-country—namely large black majorities and sizeable tracts of land with exhausted soil—allowed some freedmen to purchase small plots of inferior land along the South Carolina and Georgia coast. Reconstituted black families fought removal from their personal land tracts and defended their family units, allowing women to primarily govern domestic labor. Post-Reconstruction reversals in black political rights ultimately meant that much of blacks' independence and resistance gave way under the forces of social violence and indebted labor.²⁷

The exorbitant interest and outright trickery that planters and merchants employed in their contracts kept freedmen—along with many white sharecroppers—in a long-term spiral of debt. Thus Jonathan Weiner argued in his *Social Origins of the New South* (1978), that planters maintained their status after the Civil War through political power and physical violence. Tenancy and sharecropping were not the systems of free labor that many northern capitalists idealized, nor did they allow southern farmers the independence to which they aspired. Landlords' oversight and merchants' usury system exploited poor farm laborers. However, Ronald L. F. Davis showed that continual, close supervision of labor was the exception, not the rule. He asserted that: “sharecropping was not the same as slavery...Freedmen lived and worked in families, were relatively

²⁷ See Ronald L.F. Davis, *Good and Faithful Labor: From Slavery to Sharecropping in the Natchez District 1860-1890* (Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977), 79-80; 93-95; 120-121. See also Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977). See also Charles Orser, *The Material Basis of the Postbellum Tenant Plantation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988); Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1860-1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

unsupervised, and were generally free to move.” Many black southerners did manage to climb the agricultural ladder, particularly through the 1870s. Yet, as Roger Shugg established in 1936, most poor black and white farmers fell victim to predatory credit systems in the late 19th-century.²⁸

Davis agreed with the popular narrative that the emergence of debt peonage in the form of the crop lien system was part of the post-war ‘compromise’ whereby the federal government remanded civil and political power to local southern institutions. Davis correctly asserted that both local, state, and national governments were complicit in the widespread use of coerced labor throughout the South. Union military policies of “non-intervention” and later day political compromises between Republicans and Democrats left freedmen and poor whites to negotiate with planter and bureaucratic elites’ demands for cheap labor. In spite of freedmen’s role in resisting gang labor, in the aftermath of slavery, most blacks and poor whites fell into a permanent indebted labor force. Tenancy and the crop lien system bound laborers to the land, as well as to merchants and landowners. This form of agricultural debt peonage is the earliest identified and most common form of peonage that appears in the historiography on labor in the South. However sharecropping was not typically the most brutal or extreme form of peonage labor.²⁹

The black codes that replaced slave codes following the Civil War provided southern states the power to command black labor for agricultural and industrial production through the convict lease system. Following Woodward’s thesis of new economic and social patterns, Ed Ayers concurred that ‘undercapitalization’

²⁸ Jonathan Wiener, *Social Origins of the New South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Davis, *Good and Faithful Labor* (1977), 169-181.

²⁹ Davis, *Good and Faithful Labor* (1977), 79.

characterized southern economics after the war. He asserted that the origins of the convict lease system developed out of the custom of racial ideologies of black indolence and the new imperative of industrial capitalism. The need to control free black labor was part of the South's "nascent capitalism" whereby states were short on revenue and labor. The convict lease system, born out of this need, was supported by the southern states' centralized penal systems. Thus state prisons operated as law enforcement mechanisms of the larger white Democratic agenda to enforce social order through the convict lease system. Prisons leased out black convicts for labor in the most difficult and dangerous work. Convicts built railroads, mined coal, steel, and phosphate, and later laid roads and highways. Ayers determined that states sought to maximize convicts' labor, leading to abusive and violent working conditions. Capitalist profit motives and racial ideologies devalued the individual health and safety of black convicts. Both black and white southerners saw the convict lease system as tainted by cronyism and backroom political deals. However, due to race bating, opposing the lease system remained politically unpopular.³⁰

Building on Ayers's work, David Oshinsky agreed that after the Civil War conservative ideologues and wealthy industrialists conspired to detain and direct black male labor toward corporate agriculture and extractive industries. Oshinsky's examination of Mississippi State Prison known as Parchman Farm emphasized the racially charged rhetoric and corrupt political dealings of men such as Governor James K. Vardaman. Governor Vardaman promoted racial regression theories, which assumed that without proper oversight and subjection to hard labor, blacks would revert to

³⁰ Ed Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th Century American South*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984) 187-193; 202; 216-218.

indolence and violence. Such racial ideologies exploited white fears of independent blacks and reinforced white public support for the convict lease system. Oshinsky, like Ayers, emphasized the customary practices of slavery as the context from which the brutal convict lease system arose. Calling it the “new legal slavery,” he pointed to cotton-picking “quotas” or “tasks” as well as whippings forced on inmates at Parchman to draw his comparison. He likened the black inmates who guarded convict laborers to the black drivers of the slave plantation. Oshinsky highlighted the injustice of the convict lease, stating: “Convict leasing was about profits, brutality, and racist ideas.” Oshinsky exposed the racial discrimination and human torture that persisted at Parchman Farm, even as states’ infrastructures and economies improved in the 20th century.³¹

Along with Oshinsky, Alex Lichtenstein pointed to the sad irony that modernization of penal codes and southern economies led to increased use of convict labor. Lichtenstein’s *Twice The Work of Free Labor* (1996) added nuance to Woodward, Ayers, and Oshinsky’s contention that undercapitalization of southern state governments and racism led to the impetus for convict labor, showing that “Progressive” improvements to transportation infrastructure, which benefited farmers and factory owners throughout the South, relied on the brutal archaic labor regime of the convict lease. Many southern social reformers believed employing convicts on public works aided inmates and society more than simply locking them in cells, which was relatively expensive and thought to perpetuate indolence among black southerners. Southern social elites viewed putting convicts to work on public roads and industrial

³¹ David Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice*. (New York: Free Press, 1996) 63-71; 96.

production as providing both a hard consequence for criminals and a practical, necessary value to the state. Thus convict labor underwrote the construction of better roads, bridges, and dams. Litchenstein shows that throughout the early 20th century states increasingly leased white convicts; this brought more attention to the lease, eventually leading to reforms in the system.³²

Along with Litchenstein, Douglas A. Blackmon, in his *Slavery by Another Name* (2008), accepted the so-called progressive underpinnings of convict labor and debt peonage systems in corporate industrial and agricultural sectors of the South. As William A. Link showed in *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism* (1992), southern Progressivism often employed state intervention to achieve political and social reforms that contradicted democratic principles. Reformers' sense of a new, more hygienic social order included institutionalizing racial segregation, the political disfranchisement of black southerners, and penal reforms such as convict labor laws. Like Oshinsky, Blackmon's narrative expressed moral criticisms of this "new slavery," which he argued was widespread, and more violent and inhumane than antebellum slavery. He argued convicts and peons were more expendable than slaves. But black convicts were not solely victims of white opportunism and sadism; they often actively sought release from prison and reform of labor conditions.³³

Unlike tenants, sharecroppers, and peons, roughly 90% of convict laborers were black. As Oshinsky and Blackmon point out, convicts carried out the most brutal work of constructing the transportation infrastructure of the modern South. Marry Ellen Curtin argued that blacks were both victims in the development of, and agents in the

³² Alexander C. Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (London; New York: Verso, 1996).

³³ Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name* (2008) 218; William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

deconstruction of the convict lease system. Like her predecessor, Eugene D. Genovese, and other scholars such as Julie Saville, Curtin's work presented the perspective of black prisoners and the larger black community toward the convict lease system. She highlighted women who worked as convicts, as well as the role of the black political and religious organizations that opposed the lease. Curtin argued that post-emancipation blacks, even those in bondage, challenged state penal systems. Pointing to the strikes in the Pratt mines in Alabama, she showed how prisoners struck, slowed production, and with the help of their families, used the court system to fight their convictions. Additionally, she examined how convicts used the labor skills they developed in the Pratt coalmines to obtain employment opportunities for themselves once they were released. Curtin did not minimize the oppression convicts endured—the coal mines of Alabama were among the most brutal in the United States—but she reminds us not to ignore the culture of defiance that black convicts acted out while imprisoned and the resilience they embodied once released. The convict lease system, in all its debauched legality, ultimately remained visible to the public eye. This allowed for public oversight and eventually reform. In addition to using convict labor, coal mines also attracted free laborers to relocate from their farms to company towns in hopes of finding economic opportunity. Free laborers often fell into exploitative patterns of debt peonage in coalmines and lumber towns.³⁴

Company towns have long been a focal point of interest for southern labor historians. In 1931, Anna Rochester published the seminal leftist pro-labor history of the coal industry in the United States. In attempting to offer a factual description of the

³⁴ Mary Ellen Curtin, *Black Prisoners and Their World, Alabama, 1865-1900* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000) 73-74; 130-131; 135-144; 168-170.

state of coal mines, working conditions and wages, Rochester utilized the reports of government investigations from the 1922 U.S. Coal Commission. Rochester found that a combination of industrial mechanization in the 1920s, along with company designs to increase production and profits, drastically decreased wages and endangered the safety of workers in the coal mines of Pennsylvania and Illinois. Rochester argued that the company-owned stores, police, and housing in coal towns contributed to an outright monopoly, which exploited every aspect of workers' daily lives. From her Marxist approach, Rochester asserted that workers were completely dominated by the coal owners, who maintained pools of labor and generated great profits by keeping workers in a perpetual state of debt. In the post-World War Two era, the field of labor history expanded beyond Marxist interpretations, but questions of class-consciousness and conflict still influence historical debates over labor and environment in the South.³⁵

The Materialist, Progressive school of historians, which included controversial works by Charles Beard, Robert Shugg, and Anna Rochester, gave way in the post-war era to the consensus school. Led by Richard Hofstadter, consensus historians downplayed the socio-economic divisions among Americans. But by the 1970s, the work of "New Labor" historians, influenced by Herbert Gutman and David Montgomery, used new approaches of method to argue that culture, class, and labor conflict occupied a prominent place in the history of the United States. As the perfect example of a later day "New labor" historian, David Corbin not only argued that a uniquely diverse, American class-consciousness existed in company towns, he moved his focal point to the coal fields of southern West Virginia. Picking up on Rochester's leftism, and utilizing E.P. Thompson's British social history, Corbin argued that the exploitation by company

³⁵ Anna Rochester, *Labor and Coal* (New York: International Publishers, 1931).

towns and their “guard system” left workers no choice but to identify as a unified group and unionize under the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). Emphasizing class conflict, Corbin contributed a detailed picture of life in southern mining towns. He portrayed the history of the mining towns as progressing from highly exploitative capitalist industries to liberalized “paternalistic” communities of families based around churches and schools.³⁶

Countering notions of monolithic social class-consciousness posed by Corbin, Ronald L. Lewis connected the legacy of slavery in Virginia coal mining to the racial discrimination, convict labor, and failure of bi-racial unions in the post-bellum period. Lewis’s regional comparative study proved the distinct historical evolutions of racial discriminatory patterns in southern coalmines. Joe W. Trotter provided a detailed picture of the development of black working class culture in the coal towns of West Virginia. Both rural and semi-rural blacks migrated to coal mines for the economic opportunities available there. Yet racial discrimination in job allocation, segregation in company towns, and cultural divisions between working class blacks and professional class of blacks who served them remained prevalent. Though Trotter downplayed class divisions within the black community, he successfully argued that racial divisions remained a major obstacle to bi-racial unionism throughout the early 20th century. The

³⁶ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and The Men Who Made It*, (New York: Knopf, 1948); See also Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 323, 334, 348; Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society* (1976); Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor* (1987); David Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981).

study of racial ideologies in southern extractive labor has a substantial foundation but deserves further research and renewed attention.³⁷

Recent scholars continue to recalibrate approaches to histories of coal industries and other company mining town operations, challenging the traditional Marxist paradigm and going beyond the class conflicted leftist narratives of the 1930s and New Labor histories. Like Corbin, Curtis Seltzer's *Fire in the Hole: Miners and Managers in the American Coal Industry* (1985) took a chronological view of the coal industry. However, as a standard social science case study, Seltzer argued that the problems of the coal industry were far more complex than previously accepted. He asserted that UMWA attempts to control supply, stabilize labor relations, and improve living standards created only mildly better conditions than the undercapitalization, instability, and labor conflict of the laissez-faire era. Seltzer's approach was unique in that he appeared sympathetic to workers, while at the same time he argued for private ownership of coalfields and the establishment of useful government regulations. Seltzer portrayed coal miners far less romantically than most scholarly historians have; however, he offered a calculated historical assessment of labor relations in the American coal industry.³⁸

Like Seltzer, Crandall A. Shiflett argued against the leftist monopoly thesis put forth by Rochester and for a more dynamic and diverse relationship between workers' culture and company paternalism, a relationship he saw as crucial to understanding coal towns. Countering the argument that Appalachia was a timeless, self-sufficient, idyllic

³⁷ Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict 1780-1980* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1987). See also Joe. W. Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia 1915-1932* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

³⁸ Curtis Seltzer, *Fire in the Hole: Miners and Managers in the American Coal Industry* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1985).

region exploited by imperialist coal companies, Shiflett posited that Appalachia had always been connected to global markets, while at the same time it remained burdened by labor surpluses and land scarcity resulting in economic hardship for working class Appalachians. Continuing the New Labor approach examining communities of workers, he argued that moving to coal towns represented a practical family decision for poor whites, blacks, and European immigrants in the South. The farm-to-mine transition did not cause culture shock for most workers, nor were ethnic differences entirely threatening to workers' identity. Shiflett asserted that most ethnic groups shared cultural tropes such as family, faith, and recreation, though the expressions of these values may have taken distinct forms.

Like Shiflett, Price V. Fishback argued that the “contentment sociology” practiced by companies in the early 1900s meant that relatively few miners actually “owed their souls to the company store.” Nor were miners generally paid in “scrip” or forced to pay outrageously high prices for food and supplies compared with urban workers. Taking on Corbin, Fishback asserted that both competition between companies and worker mobility allowed miners to choose the company for whom they worked. Fishback accepted the findings of the 1922 U.S. Coal Commission investigation, which stated that transportation costs may have caused higher prices in remote, isolated company stores, but that higher wages offset those prices. The character of coal town labor conditions improved for many workers throughout the 20th century. Though the credit systems used in family and community-centered often meant workers borrowed

to get by, indebted peons in rural isolated labor spaces carried out distinctly more brutal jobs than miners in company towns.³⁹

Historians of company towns in other extractive industries have followed the dominant theme of company monopoly versus workers' autonomy. Gordon Bachus detailed the evolution of Bauxite, Arkansas, as it grew from a backwoods, primitive operation to a paternalistic community. Early on, all male work crews used pick and shovel to extract the minerals, drying extracted ore by log fires. After 1901, the extension of the railroad to Bauxite meant an influx of workers and their families. The work of English economist James Anthony Froude convinced owners that providing for the welfare of workers—i.e., housing, health care, etc.—was in the best interest of the company. By 1912, Bauxite became a “self-sufficient community” with schools, churches, stores, roads, a water supply, and medical facilities. Though malaria was common amongst workers, not a single death occurred in Bauxite during the influenza epidemic of 1920. Child labor existed in Bauxite; however, a minimum wage was maintained—14 year-olds were paid \$1.50 for a ten-hour workday. In the 1970s and 1980s historians of environment and the West developed research on forestry and timbering industries. But only recently have scholars begun to look at sawmill and lumber company towns with the same social and cultural analyses their predecessors applied to other southern extractive industrial labor operations.⁴⁰

³⁹ Crandall A. Shifflett, *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991); For a comparative study of coal see Roger Fagge, *Power, Culture and Conflict in the Coalfields: West Virginia and South Whiles, 1900-1922* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1996); Price V. Fishback, “Did Coal Miners ‘Owe Their Souls to the Company Store?’ Theory and Evidence from the Early 1900s.” *Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (December, 1986) 1011-1029.

⁴⁰ Gordon Bachus, “Background and Early History of a Company Town: Bauxite, Arkansas: A Brief History of the Aluminum Industry.” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Winter, 1968); For more on Forestry see See Thomas R. Cox, Robert S. Maxwell, Phillip Drenon Thomas, and Joseph J. Malone, *This Well-Wooded Land: Americans and Their Forests from Colonial Times to the Present* (Lincoln:

Timbering, one of the largest industries in the post-bellum South, was both highly lucrative for owners and extremely dangerous for workers. Consistent with C. Vann Woodward's "Colonial Economy" thesis, Michael Curtis showed that the development of the Great Southern Lumber Company (GSLC) in Bogalusa, Louisiana in the 20th century stemmed from the expansionist agenda of New York Lumber Company's Frank H. Goodyear. With an eye toward profits from harvesting the South's expansive forests, Goodyear sought southern lumber to sell for railroad ties, cordwood for fuel, and wood for construction projects throughout the world. By the 1880s, Goodyear's speculators bought enormous tracts of Louisiana long leaf pine forest for \$1.25 an acre. Briefly discussing the ecological and immigrant labor aspects of the industry, Curtis explained that Goodyear brought ox teams of Italians, Hungarians, Polish, Mexican, and black laborers into the forests of Bogalusa in 1906 to cut down and process the durable and dense species of pine found there. Paid 12 cents a day, the men slept on split logs with pine needles for cushions. Emphasizing industrial development in the region, Curtis noted that by 1908, a lumber mill was in full operation and GSLC workers experienced higher wages and better living conditions than those in any comparable industry. By 1920, the drastic deforestation caused by GSLC clearing of over 100 acres per day led Goodyear's managers to begin a "reforestation" program. GSLC workers fenced off young pine seedlings to protect them from hogs and other livestock, plowed fire lines, erected fire towers, and allowed state foresters to engineer

University of Nebraska Press, 1985); Michael Williams, *Americans and Their Forests: A Historical Geography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Harold K. Steen, *The U.S. Forest Service: A History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976); David A. Clary, *Timber and the Forest Service* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986); William G. Robbins, *American Forestry: A History of National, State, and Private Cooperation* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985); Thomas R. Cox, *Mills and Markets: A History of the Pacific Coast Lumber Industry to 1900* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974).

these private forests. Lumber mill communities have largely been viewed mostly in terms of the industrial and economic promises they held for southerners, but social and cultural studies scholars are beginning to develop more nuanced perspectives of the lumber communities of the South.⁴¹

Will Jones built on the cultural and race studies methods of African-American historians in his analysis of black lumber workers in the 20th century South. *The Tribe of Black Ulysses* (2004) followed the emphasis on black community studies led by slavery scholars Eugene D. Genovese and Herbert Gutman, and the ‘resistance’ model articulated by James C. Scott and Robin D.G. Kelley. Jones examined the cultural practices of southern black lumbermen in the context of the mill towns they helped develop. Overturning Howard Odum and E. Franklin Frazier’s descriptions of dysfunctional, anti-modern black male laborers, Jones argued that black men contributed to the development of lumber towns, challenged Jim Crow laws, and shaped the rural South of the early 20th century. Black workers played a key role by “moving families into sawmill villages and compelling their employers to adapt workplace and social policies to conform to their evolving social and cultural standards.” As the largely male work camps became populated by families black workers built homes, established churches, and organized baseball teams that traveled to compete in other black communities throughout the South. Jones’s emphasis on the agency of black lumber workers shows that in this semi-skilled trade, some blacks gained economic and social advantages from the development of extractive industries in the South.⁴²

⁴¹ Michael Curtis, “Early Development and Operations of the Great Southern Lumber Company.” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Autumn, 1973) 347-368.

⁴² Robin D.G. Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *Journal Of American History*, Vol. 80, No. 1 (June, 1993) 75-112; See Also James C. Scott,

Peonage labor, as a subset of the wider debt labor systems throughout the modern South, remains a much more illusive and slippery subject. Pete Daniel's groundbreaking monograph on the legal history of workers and federal officials who sought to expose peonage labor practices in the South stands as the only substantial monograph to date focusing solely on peonage labor. Daniel's work exposed the reality that outside of the highly visible systems of convict labor and company towns, a darker, less visible form of coercive labor existed throughout the South. On isolated plantations, in railroad construction camps tucked deep in forests, and on turpentine farms hidden in the swamps of the South, southern blacks, some northern whites, and European immigrants fell victim to a brutal form of coerced labor at least comparable to any experienced by the convicts in Alabama's Pratt mines. Daniel's research into the Department of Justice (DOJ) files related to peonage investigations revealed the coercion and murder of farm laborers, railroad workers, and turpentine men. Daniel's work also revealed the difficulty federal agents had exposing the exploitation of peons who lived and labored in the rural corners of the American South.⁴³

Both Pete Daniel and the federal investigators he studied suggested the ethnic status of southern blacks and southeastern European immigrants, as well as their isolation in the unfriendly rural South, made them uniquely vulnerable to exploitation. DOJ documents reveal the intersection between peonage and convict labor laws. Employers often conspired with local police to restrain laborers and remand them either to harsh labor on chain gangs, or to lease them to the same local employers from whom

Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Resistance in South East Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); Will Jones, *The Tribe of Black Ulysses: African American Lumber Workers in the Jim Crow South* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004) 61-66; 76-86; 106-111.

⁴³ Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery*: (1972).

they had fled before being arrested. For the most part, the peonage Daniel identified differed from convict labor, sharecropping, and company mine labor in that peons often stated they were hired by farmers or directed to construction jobs through employment agents. Once inside isolated rural labor camps, employers and foremen coerced workers through charging outrageous transportation and supply costs or using violent force, or both. Employers then forcefully prevented workers from leaving the work camps, threatening them with arrest for vagrancy, assault, or even death if they tried. The outright corruption of local and state officials along with the bureaucratic limitations of the Justice Department formed a series of obstacles that peons often found impossible to escape.⁴⁴

Ronald L. F. Davis pointed to the ‘compromises’—first between the Union military and southern elites after the Civil War, then between the federal and state governments under Reconstruction—that remanded freedmen and poor farmers to the political and legal power of planters and merchants. By the early 20th century, the federal investigators at the center of peonage cases sought to expose indebted and coercive labor practices and prove them unconstitutional. Yet they found, as Daniel showed, that federal and state judges often sympathized with or owed their appointments to southern employers, dismissing suits against them or letting them off with minimal fines when they were found guilty. The Department of Justice files on peonage reveal that Federal Bureau of Investigation and Justice Department officials ignored many complaints of peonage, referring them to state governments instead. This pattern revealed that though some DOJ officials hoped to expose peonage and prosecute violators, the “old boy” network in Washington lacked the political will, and perhaps the

⁴⁴ Ibid, 59-64; 101-107.

resources and organization, to challenge southern “home rule” or monitor the isolated rural-industrial labor spaces. Peonage was not technically or formally outlawed until the 1911 Alonzo Bailey case. Daniel articulated the role of New South politics in the accommodation of southern employers, but he left unexplored the roles of non-human physical environments in peonage labor systems.⁴⁵

The underdeveloped body of literature on peonage labor has largely taken a legal and political approach to viewing coerced labor in the South. Much like historians of convict labor, both Daniel and Douglas Blackmon accept that the legacies of white supremacist racial ideologies, more than two centuries of slavery, and the undercapitalization of the southern economy created the context under which peonage labor developed. Blackmon refers to southern elites such as Georgia Federal Judge Emory Speer, who took an interest in peonage cases, but failed to recognize what Blackmon called a “venomous contempt for black life” at the heart of southern society. The notion that blacks would not work unless coerced, which elites such as Mississippi Governor James K. Vardaman spouted in order to reinforce support for the convict lease system, contributed to an almost unspoken code of laws among southern agricultural and extractive industry employers. But not all peons were black; southern and eastern European immigrants suffered similar abuses as they migrated throughout the South seeking economic opportunity in extractive industry jobs. Scholars contend that racial ideologies of ‘whiteness’—particularly of Anglo-American heritage—contributed to employers’ manipulation of southern blacks and foreign immigrants well into the 20th century.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Davis, *Good and Faithful Labor* (1977), 93-95; Daniel, *Shadow of Slavery* (1972), 105-110.

⁴⁶ Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name* (2008), 235-243.

Douglas Blackmon and Pete Daniel argue that the vulnerability of black and eastern European workers made them attractive to employers, not their race. In their studies they mention the remote and difficult character of peonage workspaces. Blackmon writes, “especially on the backcountry roads and rural rail lines of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida, no black person living outside the explicit protection of whites could again feel fully secure.” Daniel argued that like lynching, “peonage represented but one aspect of the violent South” which “had not moved very far from the frontier in either appearance or custom,” The political reality that federal government lacked the will or the ability to monitor the enormous isolated rural areas of the South left Progressive reformers such as Fred Cubberly scrambling to expose in courts the fraud and brutality perpetrated on peons. But those same courts would hardly convict a white man on the word of a black witness. Daniel referred to “The dark side of the moon” as a metaphor for the South, where rural customs of racism, peonage, and lynch law still ruled the day. C. Vann Woodward’s assertion that the surplus of unemployed labor and the lack of capital in state economies created new hybrid patterns of poverty amongst the smokestacks and railways of the rural South should be further explored. Room remains for an examination of relationships between laborers and the physical environment of the rural South, particularly as they related to peonage labor.⁴⁷

Karl Jacoby’s work, *Crimes Against Nature*, brilliantly complicated problematic paradigms that conjoined working class labor and environmental conservation movements. His narrative of urban elite conservationists’ infringement upon the “moral ecologies” of rural local working classes provided a brilliant window into the potential

⁴⁷ Ibid, 234; Daniel, *Shadow of Slavery* (1972), 10.

for understanding the role of non-human nature in class divisions within various geographic regions where environmental transformation took place. Yet, as Theodore Catton pointed out in his review of *Crimes Against Nature*, Jacoby “exaggerates the power of the state” and “romanticizes the collective actions of local populace.” My examination of peonage workspaces will build on Labor, Environmental, and Southern historians call for more work that exposes relationships among class divisions, human and non-human phenomena, and political, social, and cultural forces. Building on the work of Herbert Gutman, Richard White, Jacqueline Jones, and Karl Jacoby, My work attempts to complicate several binaries, specifically notions of Labor vs. Capital, progressives vs. conservative, human dominance over non-human nature, and conservationist vs. local ecology.⁴⁸

Mart A. Stewart has pointed out that “Landscapes occupy the nexus of interactions between humans and the environment.” The foundation of peonage labor systems was the need for what Stewart called “labor on the land,” and the physical environment of the South deeply impacted the social relationships that characterized peonage labor systems. Using the Department of Justice Peonage files, FBI files, and oral histories of southern woodsmen entrepreneurs, I expand the relatively underdeveloped body of literature on the relationship between peonage labor and the physical environment in the South.⁴⁹

Workers and employers clashed over the difficulty of the physical environment in the rural-industrial economies of the South. The boosterism that drew companies to transform an untapped southern wilderness into an economically productive region

⁴⁸ *Environmental History*, (January 2002).

⁴⁹ Mart A. Stewart, *What Nature Suffers to Groe: Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996) 12.

relied heavily on environmental ideologies of progressive conservation or what Gifford Pinchot called “wise use.” When *padrones* recruited Italian and Greek immigrants for labor in the Florida swamps and the forests of Alabama they employed environmental rhetoric to attract workers. Notions of easy work in warm climates often drew the recent Mediterranean migrants from the northeastern urban industrial centers to the jobs in the rural South. But in the railroad camps and the turpentine farms, sustainable land use was not the issue of dispute between workers and bosses. Rather, workers’ subjection to harsh physical environments, isolation from their families, and inability to access legal protection from the brutality of managers, dominated the daily interactions of these different classes in the work camps of the South. Inside peonage work camps, deplorable labor and environmental conditions converged creating the context for dangerous tensions between human and non-human nature.

Chapter Two:

“If I had known it was an Island, I would not have gone.” Life and Labor in the Florida Keys Railway Work Camps: 1905/1906.

On a fall day in 1906, Giulio Giammella, a 36 year-old recent Italian immigrant to New York City, answered an employment advertisement in the Italian-American newspaper, the *Progress Italo Americano* directing him to the Sabia Company at 61 Prince Street. The ad reported Sabia sought laborers for construction of the Florida East Coast Rail Road. Giammella listened to Francesco Sabia address a group of men, all curious about fliers they saw around town that read, “1,000 men wanted in Florida, the land where it never snows.” Sabia promised the men jobs in a warm climate that winter. He told them that they could go to a great place where “oranges, bananas, and apples” grew in abundance and that they could “eat them for breakfast every day.” Convinced by Sabia’s promise of Florida’s abundance, Giammella accepted a position and within a few days boarded a train heading south. On the train, the labor foreman, Mr. Gallat, comforted the men nervous about traveling so far from home, telling them “to keep a brave heart” because they were going to “a very good place where they would find everything they needed.” Giammella and the thousands of other men who followed a similar path from New York to Florida instead found brutal working conditions in an extremely harsh archipelago island environment.⁵⁰

Henry Flagler, an executive at Standard Oil, envisioned the Florida East Coast Railway as a major triumph of industrial engineering over nature. His goal was to develop the southernmost settled outpost of the United States for tourism and

⁵⁰Giulio Giammella Affidavit, Classified Subject Files of the Department of Justice, National Archives, Washington D.C., Record Group 60. (Hereafter cited according to file and box number, DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1).

transportation of industrial products from Key West, the closest U.S. deep-sea port to the planned Panama Canal. The FECR initially connected Jacksonville and Miami, and underwent extension in 1905 in order to join Miami to Key West, a distance of about 156 miles. The planned route involved constructing roughly 49 miles of the railroad over land and an additional 107 miles across water and the islands of the Florida Keys; Flagler proudly called it the “Over Sea Railroad.” Construction began in May 1905. Between October 29, 1905, and January 23, 1906, the company shipped nearly 4,700 men from New York and Philadelphia to Florida. As a Gilded Age industrialist, Flagler whole-heartedly believed in humanity’s ability to harness natural resources for human consumption and to fundamentally reorder the physical world for human use. However, the men who carried out the construction of the FECR fell subject to terrible environmental conditions and violent labor foremen inside the poorly provisioned island labor camps.⁵¹

Early in 1906, a number of men returned to New York charging that the Sabia Company induced them to go south through misrepresentation of working conditions. The men claimed FECR foremen worked them under armed guard, and prevented them from leaving the work camps. Official Department of Justice reports indicate that sleeping quarters largely consisted of tents pitched on the rocky ground. The men suffered clouds of mosquitoes, worked in knee-deep water, and faced violent bosses who refused to let them leave until they paid off their transportation costs. Due to the island geography, no obvious physical path for escape existed. However, many of the men did

⁵¹Les Stanford, *Last Train to Paradise: Henry Flagler and the Spectacular Rise and Fall of the Railroad that Crossed an Ocean* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2002); David Leon Chandler, *Henry Flagler: The Astonishing Life and Times of the Visionary Robber Baron who Founded Florida* (New York: Macmillan, 1986); John Wellborn Martin, *Henry M. Flagler, 1830-1913; Florida’s East Coast is His Monument!* (New York: Newcomen Society in North America, 1956).

manage to leave, either escaping by boat, or by negotiating with the foreman for their early release. Eventually, most of the men made it back to New York where many decried the terrible working conditions and violence in the camps. Several men testified to federal investigators in the Department of Justice who worked to expose peonage labor throughout the South.⁵²

Social-justice progressives in the Department of Justice used the investigation into the Florida East Coast Rail Road Company's Florida Keys construction camps to bring a suit against Frank Sabia for violation of the 1866 slave kidnapping law. Though the Department of Justice failed to establish that "slavery" officially existed in the Keys work camps, DOJ files reveal that the physical environment of the Keys facilitated and sustained the peonage labor system there. The immense isolated spaces, volatile climate, and difficult topography of the Keys made acquiring and provisioning labor particularly problematic. The harsh physical environment made workers' daily lives miserable, prompting them to attempt escapes. Foremen tried to restrain workers' mobility once inside the island labor camps and as a result hundreds of marginalized European ethnic immigrant, as well as black and white workers fell victim to peonage labor regimes inside the FECR camps.⁵³

Labor recruiters for the Florida East Coast Railway camps manipulated workers by misrepresenting the character of the physical environment in the Keys. Frank Sabia

⁵²DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1. In the later part of 1906, a special agent of the Bureau of Labor went to Florida to investigate the charges made. At Miami he obtained statements from the constructing engineer and other officials of the company. These records held in the Department of Justice Files detail the violence between workers and the authorities in the camps, as well as workers' subjection to the physical environment.

⁵³See Pete Daniel, *Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South 1901-1969*, (1972). The Department of Justice indicted Sabia under the 1866 Slave Kidnapping Law, which proved to be a mistake as Sabia's lawyers then claimed that though peonage did exist, 'Slavery' did not; the case was dismissed; Mary Quakenbos Affidavit in DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

and his employees received three dollars from the FECR for each man they signed up and shipped to the Keys and they used advertisements in European ethnic newspapers, circulars posted in immigrant neighborhoods, and word of mouth to draw unemployed immigrants to his office. Sabia's recruitment strategy targeted Italian and Greek laborers, who, after suffering through a few frigid New York winters, responded hopefully to the promises of easy work in a warm climate. Sabia encouraged his agents to recruit within their own ethnic communities, intentionally seeking men from southern Europe because of their acclimation to, and preference for, warm weather. One G. Lapioro had an agreement with Sabia, which gave him exclusive rights to half of the profits of all Italian men he recruited, and another recruiter, Max Lipetz, testified that Sabia would not pay him for Italians.⁵⁴

Recruiters used idealized descriptions of working and living conditions to convince men to make the long journey to the Florida railroad camps. Lipetz testified that he and another recruiter, a Mr. Triay, heard Sabia continually make false representations to the men and encouraged his recruiters to do the same. In October and November of 1905 Sabia "made a specialty of boys to whom he promised 'good work, lots of wages, work near city, chance to advance to be a plumber's helper or a tinsmith or a water boy, good hotels where you can board.'" Men like Giulio Giammella were desperate enough for work to be lured by the promise of jobs as far away as

⁵⁴Max Lipetz Affidavit DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1; Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880-1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); For more on European ethnic immigrants in the U.S. see Donna Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984); Ewa Morawska, *For Bread with Butter: The Life-Worlds of East Central European Immigrants in Johnstown, Pennsylvania 1890-1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues; The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917* (New York: Hill and Wange, 2000).

Florida. Recruiters' misrepresentation of environmental and working conditions in the Florida Keys persuaded Giammella and hundreds of others to sign up for work on the railroad.⁵⁵

Word of mouth among friends and neighbors in immigrant communities also piqued workers' interest in the Florida railroad jobs. Many men testified they heard of the project in Florida from friends and acquaintances. George Morris and Frank Meany lived in Brooklyn where they met Albert Grant who showed them a ticket to Florida and told them he was going to work there. Intrigued by Grant's description of the work and Florida's abundant landscape, Morris and Meany went together the next day to Sabia's office to inquire about jobs in Florida. Sabia told them he indeed needed more men, and that "the name of the place is Miami, a nice place to work for a railroad." Convinced by Sabia's descriptions, Morris and Meany boarded the Pennsylvania train for Florida at Jersey City that very evening.⁵⁶

Sabia's misleading descriptions of the Keys ignored the extreme conditions of the island archipelago. E.T. Clyatt of Jacksonville Florida worked as a foreman at Key Largo Camp from January 1905 to December 1905, stated that labor agents told workers "they were to work at Cocoanut Grove, 5 miles from Miami, Fla.," and that if they had known what the true conditions were in the camps, "not a single one would have left N.Y.C. for such a wretched place." Percy White applied in person, requesting to know all about the work and climate. Sabia reportedly told him that "the climate was simply grand; no snow in winter, etc., and that the work consisted of railroad work with

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶George Morris Affidavit, DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

pick and shovel but that the work was not hard.” Harry Hermanson, a 19 year-old from Brooklyn testified that:

[I] met a man who was distributing circulars. He came up and said ‘Do you want to go south?’ I answered ‘No.’ [the man] then said ‘You had better go; lots of boys are going and it is a lovely place. You will have all the fruit and oranges you want and easy work. I asked him ‘What kind of work is it’ and he said ‘ We want 10,000 men to go to the land where it never snows. It is a fine place; you could not live any better. Young fellows have a better time there than they do up here.’ He then took us into a saloon and gave us 3 or 4 drinks and jollied us up all the while.

Drunk, the boy followed the recruiter to the Sabia Co. office on Prince Street where labor agents took his name and put him on the ferry to the train station. Hermanson later testified: “We had no idea we were going to be taken to an island.” In testimony to investigators, most men consistently denied knowing the specifics of Florida’s physical environment. However, as they made their way south, the men began to hear of the harsh landscapes and brutal working conditions of the camps from other men returning north.⁵⁷

Giacomo Lapipero, hired by the Sabia Co. to recruit workers, accompanied the first shipment of about 90 laborers from New York in late October 1905. He took them to the Pennsylvania Railroad at the Canal St. pier, where he and Mr. Triay boarded the men on trains. Giammella, who may have been in the same group, left New York City on October 31st, taking the ferry to the Jersey side where he and a hundred or so men boarded the Pennsylvania railroad. Later that night, after passing Richmond, Va., the train clattering upon the tracks, Giamella witnessed a young man of about 25, whom he described as “tall, smooth shaven, blond with gray eyes” ask the foreman, Mr. Gallat, for some food. Gallat told him to wait until they reached Jacksonville, but the young man insisted Gallat provide something to eat. Gallat responded by ordering another worker

⁵⁷E.T. Clyatt, Percy White, Harry Hermanson Affidavits, DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

named Hillmuller to strike the young man. “Hillmuller obeyed, giving the said fellow two blows on the nose.” At Jacksonville, Giammella witnessed several men getting off the train, so he and another man, Carl Fisher, “tried to get out and go into the town,” but policemen threatened them and forced them back onto the train. The train then carried them another 300 miles south. Upon arriving in Miami, the men were kept locked on boat docks for an entire day. That night they slept on the hard wooden docks with no blankets while a guard, club in hand, walked back and forth on the other side of the gate.⁵⁸

The next day the foremen boarded them on the boat *Biscayne*, which left at 11 a.m. Around 10 p.m. the laborers demanded food, but the foremen gave them none. The men arrived at Key Largo on or about Saturday November 4, 1905 after traveling over 1,300 miles from their homes. Like Giammella, nearly all the men went south by rail either on the Pennsylvania, Seaboard, or Atlantic Coast Line. Two company men guarded each train car and these foremen selected three workmen from each group to help them “take care of the party.” Many men, alerted by this obvious attempt at coercion, escaped during the train ride south. E.T. Clyatt, the foreman at Key Largo stated that: “In the early shipments...desertions occurred largely at Jacksonville, but in the later shipments the men deserted at various places along the line from Washington [D.C.] to Jacksonville.” Workers testified to being locked in the train cars but employers claimed that they never locked workers on the trains, nor forced them to go

⁵⁸Giulio Giammella Affidavit, DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1; For scholarship on Railroad Construction see: Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011). Maury Lein, *History of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad* (New York: Macmillan, 1972); Alfred Chandler, ed., *The Railroads: The Nation's First Big Business* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965); James E. Vance Jr., *The North American Railroad: Its Origin, Evolution and Geography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1955); Alfred Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1977).

to Florida at all. According to the employers, many of the men appeared to be of the “professional tramp class.” Thus, they argued, the men “desired to come south for the winter,” but they were shiftless and vagrant and thus foremen struggled to keep the men on the trains.⁵⁹

Many of the workers first heard about horrendous conditions in the camps from other workers while in route to Florida. Intercommunication among workers led to the large exodus of men who feared they were being coerced. It also created a significant dilemma for the recruiting agents in New York, as well as the foremen on the southbound trains and at the docks in Miami. Harry Hermanson described his and other workers’ reaction upon learning that they were to be taken to work on an island: “Some of us jumped on the F.E.C. train [going] back to Jacksonville but we were driven off by the sheriffs and Co’s men. I saw one Greek thrown off the train on his face and his baggage thrown after him.” Workers also complained via written letters to family and friends and even to the company itself. Giacomo Lappipero, the labor recruiter working for Sabia Co. reported: “That each and every day he heard of many such complaints” and that he referred them to Sabia. Max Lipetz stated: “After I had been there [at Sabia Co.] about a month, [I] heard so many complaints, that men were running away and having heard that a gang of Greeks and Italians that we had shipped had refused to go to the island.”⁶⁰

The mass escapes and subsequent attempts to restrain workers clearly caused a problem for the foremen on the trains. Albert Grant, hired by Sabia to work in the Keys, left New York for Florida in October 1905 via the Pennsylvania Railroad. He reported

⁵⁹ E.T. Clyatt Affidavit, DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

⁶⁰ Harry Hermanson, Giacomo Lappipero, Max Lipetz Affidavits, DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, box 10800, File 50-162-1.

that “Between New York and Jacksonville several men jumped on the train telling us not to go as it was a bad place. Several jumped off the train at Philadelphia but were stopped by the old man in charge.” Some men managed successful escapes at Jacksonville, but Grant was not so lucky. When he tried to slip off the train with several other men, guards thwarted their attempt. J.C. Meredith, the construction engineer at the Keys work camps stated “A large portion of the desertions at Miami were instigated by discharged employees making misrepresentations as to the conditions on the keys.” The multiple reports coming from the camps to both workers and their relatives clearly contradicted the information given them in New York by Sabia and his recruiters. Max Lipetz stated “At one time we had some trouble in getting men to go as there had been so many complaints about the treatment in Fla.” The reports of terrible environmental and working conditions in the FECR camps caused many to flee the trains even before arriving on the Keys; however, most men were not so fortunate.⁶¹

The distance between islands determined the difficulty of constructing the FECR. Moreover, official reports indicate both the physical division, as well as the racial division, among laborers in the Keys. According to the special agent of the Department of Justice who visited the Keys in March of 1906, men labored at 13 construction camps between Homestead camp on the mainland and the camp at Key West. The Department of Justice did not inspect every camp where construction occurred. However, investigators visit camps at Key Largo, Windley’s Island off Umbrella Key, Matecumbe Key, Long Key, Key Vaca, Summerland Key, Ramfod Key, Cudjoe Key, and Key west. The report included the comment that at least two of these were exclusively “negro camps,” and in other camps whites and blacks worked together but slept in separate

⁶¹Albert Grant, J.C. Meredith, Max Lipetz Affidavits, *ibid.*

tents. All of the other camps were composed exclusively of white workers. Its clear that workers were separated by race in their official location and housing; however, workers of all colors and backgrounds shared the experience of terrible labor and environmental conditions.⁶²

By the time workers arrived in Miami, most had experienced some form of poor treatment, and many had traveled for days without food, suffered beatings, and encountered resistance from foremen and police when they tried to leave. But upon discovering that they were being transported beyond the shore of the mainland, many expressed far greater fear. Vincent Paradise stated the foremen sent him to camp number 5 on lower Matecumbe Key, “Had I known that I was to go on any of the Florida Keys, I would not have gone.” Workers feared leaving the mainland because once on the islands they could not leave of their own volition. The possibility of returning to New York amounted to the only true sense of security many workers felt they had as they ventured further and further from home. The lack of access to town life, news from home, or alternate employment made the thought of working on the Florida Keys unbearable to many of the workers. Many men took drastic measures to escape while others simply committed themselves to working only long enough to pay their way back to the mainland and on to other jobs, or home to New York City.⁶³

The barrier of the ocean literally surrounded the men, physically reinforcing their entrapment and visually conveying their isolation and the danger they faced in the Keys. However, workers took drastic measures to evade the armed guards who attempted to transport them from Miami to the Keys. George Morris reported his

⁶²Report of the Department of Justice Special Agent, “Location of the Construction Camps.” *ibid.*

⁶³Vincent Paradise Affidavit, *ibid.*

experience in Florida this way. “We were shut in at the Miami dock, we could not get away. As the sheriffs drove us on the boat, I heard, for the first time that we were to go to an island. The Captain in charge gave a negro a gun and told him that if anyone tried to escape to shoot him.” Several of the men did not heed the warning from foremen that if they didn’t get on the boat they would “blow [their] head off,” leaping from the side of the boat into the water. Men who remained on the boat soon found they may have wished they had jumped ship as well.⁶⁴

The geography, flora and fauna of the Florida Keys directly contributed to workers’ fear about working conditions. The enormous sky and endless ocean horizon, filled only with sparse clouds and the occasional flock of sea gulls, stood in stark contrast to New York’s crowded urban streets. Men huddled under armed guards on the decks of the tiny boats bouncing upon the tumultuous sea. Robert Murray witnessed several men falling overboard and saw that “no attempt was made to rescue them.” Unlike the trains which made frequent stops near city centers, the boats offered no opportunity for easy escape other than the desperate attempt to swim several miles to safety. As the boats approached the tiny islands, the men saw their first glimpse of the real Florida Keys in all its alien nature.⁶⁵

The ecology of the Florida Keys could not have been more foreign to men used to the heavily populated urban landscapes of New York and Philadelphia. The Keys are an archipelago of 1,700 islands extending fifteen miles from the Florida peninsula southwest to Key West. The islands themselves, formed of fossilized coral rocks, appeared jagged and amorphous. Seeing the dense hardwood forest hammocks, the men

⁶⁴George Morris Affidavit, *ibid.*

⁶⁵Ronald Winifield Affidavit, *ibid.*

probably feared what awaited them in the interior of the islands. Enormous white herons swooped overhead, dove into the water for fish, and stood eerily on stilted legs in the shallow surf. Crocodiles and indigo snakes lurked among the mangroves, perhaps avoiding being seen and noted in the records, but not escaping the fearful imagination of men landing on such exotic islands. Loggerhead turtles glided along the surf and perched on the coral rocks to bask in the sun. The vision of such a foreign landscape confirmed the men's fears of isolation, but could not have conveyed the level of hardship they would experience there.⁶⁶

Once inside the Keys work camps, even those who had suffered little on the journey south discovered they were now subject to vicious foremen and dreadful terrain. Men immediately witnessed the types of physical violence and severe environmental conditions that came to characterize their experiences in the work camps. Robert Murray stated that when he arrived at a camp at Key Largo in November 1905 he had to sleep on the rocks, and saw a “foremen kick a water boy and knock him down.” Ronald Winifield arrived at camp number 5 at Key Largo in early November as well and immediately “saw the foreman shoot a man” and not long afterward, the chief engineer “kicked a boy of 15 who was sick.” Giulio Giammella's acquaintance, a Mr. Scironi, had a letter from Sabia stating that he was to work as an Italian interpreter in the camp. Scironi was nevertheless put to work at hard labor alongside the others, including, according to Giammella, “boys of not more than 15 years, and one of 11.” After two days of grueling labor in that hot, muggy climate without proper water and

⁶⁶James W. Porter, Karen G. Porter eds., *The Everglades, Florida Bay, and Coral Reefs of the Florida Keys: An Ecosystem Sourcebook* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2002); Deborah Straw, *Natural Wonders of the Florida Keys* (Chicago: Country Roads Press, 1999); Joy Williams, *The Florida Keys: A History & Guide*, 9th Edition (New York: Random House Publishing 1987).

food, Giammella, Scironi, and about eight others decided to leave the place. But the natural physical barriers of the island landscape obstructed their escape.⁶⁷

The Keys' island geography constrained workers' mobility and facilitated foremen's peonage schemes in the FECR work camps. Employers asserted that workers could leave the camps and find other work whenever they chose, even as they used transportation and commissary costs to ensnare men in debt. However, leaving the FECR camps proved impossible for workers trapped on an island. Recruiters knew that while idealized descriptions of the physical environment allowed them to sell the men on going south to work, the actual landscape enabled foremen to retain workers who might attempt to leave the worksite. E.T. Clyatt, the foreman at the Key Largo camp stated that: "[the workers] were slaves whether they owed the company money or not, for the reason that it was impossible for them to leave the island without a pass, upon the company's boats." The combination of coercion and the imperatives of the physical environment added to the misery of workers there.⁶⁸

In addition to the isolated islands, the menacing aspects of the tropical landscape, hot climate, heavy rain, wild animals, and deadly insects appear throughout FECR workers' affidavits. The federal investigators who visited the camps used the language of 'wilderness' to underscore the severity of the workers' situation and the insensitivity of company foremen. Poor provisions, excruciating work regiments, illness, and conflicts with foremen, all characterize the experience of life in the camps. Investigators detailed these hardships in their reports in an attempt to expose the practice of peonage in the larger rural-industrial labor system. Frank Meany told

⁶⁷Robert Murray Affidavit, DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, box 10800, File 50-162-1.

⁶⁸E.T. Clyatt Affidavit, *ibid.*

investigators that the island “was densely covered with underbrush and trees. It did not look like a civilized place.” He and the other workers were put to work “chopping trees” and carrying timber so as to carve out a space for the camps among the tropical island vegetation.⁶⁹

The Florida Keys work camps consisted primarily of spaces within the hardwood forests for tents, trails leading to the railway site, and minimal if any amenities. The federal agent reported the camps were all situated near tidewater, the furthest being no more than a few hundred yards from the ocean. They sat at roughly three to nine feet above sea level to provide for the accessibility of company supply boats. The camps’ close proximity to water made the company’s enterprise more efficient but added to workers’ suffering. Workers reported the cold of wind and rainstorms, the destruction of camp structures from surging tides, and the multiple hurricanes that hit the Florida Keys in 1906.⁷⁰

One function of the temporary nature of the Florida Keys worksites was the woefully inadequate “housing” provided in the camps. In each camp there were one or two framed houses for the engineers and foremen, and one framed house for the commissary. The only exception was the camp at Upper Matecumbe Key, which had no frame buildings and consisted only of tent structures because all the lumber had to be imported to the islands. In each of the camps all of the workers lived in tents. These tents had no floors, and though the agent reported that he saw no evidence of dampness underneath the tents, he stated that: “The floor of the tents is really the coral rock of which all of the keys are formed.” The tents consisted of two sizes, one being 14 feet by

⁶⁹Frank Meany Affidavit, *ibid.*

⁷⁰Special Agent’s Report, *ibid.* See also Unisys Corporation 2009.
<http://www.weather.unisys.com/hurricane/atlantic/1906/index.html>

14 feet, the other seven feet by nine feet. As many as eight men slept crowded together in the larger tents. If the men worked less than five days a week, the company charged them 25 cents a day for the use of the tents.⁷¹

Bedding was also scarce inside the FEER camps. The company claimed it furnished “free to each laborer what is called a slat bunk, which is made of planned pine slats” three feet by six feet. However, the commissary did not sell mattresses and it was impossible for men to obtain them in the camps. The company admitted it did not provide any sort of bedding or clothing, but at the commissary men could purchase “quilts” for \$1.25 or “cotton blankets” for \$1.50. The federal agent reported that he saw very little bedding in any of the tents in the various camps. Some of the men reportedly used the natural surroundings to improve their lot, covering their slat bunks with palmetto leaves in order to make them somewhat more comfortable. The agent noted: “There are plenty of palmetto leaves to be obtained near each camp, but most of the men have not taken the trouble to procure them.” The company did provide lumber to raise the bunks off the ground but this work was left to the laborers. The agent reported “Many have not done this, but rest their bunks only on the coral surface or prop them up with rocks or sticks.” After toiling in the burning sun all day, the men found themselves too exhausted to construct legs for their bunks, nor would it have improved their situation much to do so.⁷²

The workers’ lack of personal amenities and adequate attire made working and living on the islands even more difficult. One federal agent saw very little clothing and felt obliged to state that: “It was evident that the only clothes, except underwear, which

⁷¹Department of Justice Special Agent Report, “Laborers Live In Tents” in DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

⁷²Department of Justice Special Agent Report, “Laborers Live In Tents” *ibid.*

most of the laborers possessed was that which they wore daily.” Most of the men slept in their clothing, as they did not have any blankets, and most slept in their shoes all night to keep out the cold air and pests. They explained “although it was warm during the days, the nights were quite chilly, and [we] could not take off [our] clothes and sleep in comfort.” In certain tents the agent saw one blanket for the entire group of eight men; in one he noted three or four potato sacks that the men reported the camp cook gave them for covers. One group of men used the fly from their tent as a blanket, leaving them exposed to the rain.⁷³

Workers struggled to endure what they described as the Keys’ extreme climate. Reports from the U.S. Weather Bureau at Key West provide documentation that weather conditions made living in the Keys particularly difficult for the men there. Temperatures regularly reached 91 degrees Fahrenheit, and with the humidity and sunlight caused dehydration, sunburn, and heat stroke. Temperatures at night reached as low as 55 degrees and rainfall during the winter of 1905-1906 was unusually high. The Weather Bureau reported that in December 1905, 10.03 inches of rainfall occurred, while the average for the previous 35-year period was only 1.63 inches. The construction engineer J.C. Meredith confirmed this saying, “the weather conditions have not been as good as might naturally have been expected on account of the excessive rainfall during December...[this] made the conditions around the camp worse than they would have been otherwise.” Meredith claimed that the rainfall did not seriously impede the work, as most of it fell at night, and that men did not lose more than six

⁷³Ibid.

hours of work a week on account of the rain; however, nightly rain storms tortured workers exhausted from working all day in the burning sun.⁷⁴

The unusually wet weather exacerbated the recurring problem of pests inside the camps. With rain came bugs and vermin. In a report entitled “Pests On the Keys” federal agents detailed the abundance of insects and other organisms that tormented the men in the camps. The men complained of “fleas” they found around the camps in the coral and sand. Infestations of fleas grew worse in December due to the great rainfall, which drove the pests into the tents, where “they annoyed the men at night.” Ironically, the foremen argued that tents were better for the laborers because “...a house which they might occupy would be infested with vermin.” However, the lack of proper housing failed to deter vermin, which infested much of the camps. Most notable in the records are the reports of chiggers and mosquitoes, which harassed the men day and night. Chiggers or “red bugs” bit the men, producing sores and what the federal agent called: “an almost irresistible inclination to scratch.” The salty water and air made these sores even more excruciating than they would have been otherwise. The men in camp number 81 complained about centipedes and scorpions and the special agent reported that he was shown bottles containing a live centipede and one containing a live scorpion, both of which the men said they captured inside their tents. The federal agents also reported that in a few of the camps, workers came across rattlesnakes. In camp number 80 at Key West, one agent reported seeing rattlesnake skins tacked to the side of the commissary. Such frightful and potentially deadly reptiles literally surrounded the men in the Keys work camps.⁷⁵

⁷⁴J.C. Meredith Affidavit, U.S. Weather Bureau at Key West, *ibid*.

⁷⁵Department of Justice Special Agent Report: “PESTS ON THE KEYS” *ibid*.

None of the pests created as much trepidation, suffering, and even death, as the mosquitoes that plagued the men on the islands. During the months of June through October, the mosquitoes reportedly became “very bad.” Accounts stated that due to the high levels of rainfall, mosquitoes were more numerous in 1905-1906 than in several preceding years. One federal agent noted “clouds of mosquitoes” around the men’s tents in the evenings. These mosquitoes bit the men, causing itching and sores all over their bodies, but they also carried malaria, which led to deaths. E.T. Clyatt, the foreman, testified that a black worker named Dawson was in “...a dying condition for two weeks, and begged most piteously to be taken to a hospital or somewhere he might receive treatment and get away from the mosquitoes that were literally eating him up alive.” Dawson died in his tent and Clyatt took the body, blasted a hole in the rocks with dynamite and buried him. Clyatt also testified that the mosquitoes became so pervasive they stung a mule to death overnight. The men discovered that fires and smoke kept the mosquitoes away and thus they burned black mango wood inside their tents. Mango wood produced a smoke so dense that workers reported one could not distinguish an object six inches away. Furthermore, smoke harmed workers lungs, leading to pulmonary diseases. Medical reports confirm that Dengue fever and malaria were among the most prevalent illnesses in the camps and thus many of the men cited them as the reason they wanted to leave the camps.⁷⁶

In addition to complaints about inadequate amenities and extreme weather, the men also expressed grievances related to food in the camps. One federal agent reported that lists of provisions provided by the company included pickled pork, beef, salt pork,

⁷⁶Ibid. The claims that mosquitoes killed men are vague and numbers of deaths are unsubstantiated by medical doctors, but the lack of medical attention and the prevalence of the reports on the suffering caused by mosquitoes makes it appear likely that they were cause of the worst of the suffering in the camps.

navy beans, lima beans, rice, grits, oatmeal and “plenty of fresh vegetables cabbages, potatoes, and turnips.” Though bosses showed evidence that hearty foods were brought to the camps, workers’ reports confirm that many men often did not receive enough, if any, healthy foods. The great distance from Miami to the camps made providing fresh food difficult and workers consistently testified that the company gave them insufficient food and even withheld food from men who could not work. Percy White stated that the food in camp “consisted of stale fish and rolls not fit to eat...even the walking boss, Mr. Johns said he would not give it to his dogs.” Other workers claimed that the only food given them were rotten potatoes. The federal reports also stated that it was “...difficult to get fresh meat to the camps” and even though some camps may have received shipments of meat as much as once per week, but because it was so hot and the islands had no refrigeration the supply generally lasted only two or three meals before it went bad. J.C. Meredith, the construction engineer, confirmed that: “the camps were stretched out to such an extent that some of those most distant would receive tainted meat when delivered.” He guessed that one-sixth of the shipped meat was tainted by the time it reached the workmen.⁷⁷

Mr. W.C. Wilson, the resident engineer at camp number 8, on the lower end of Windley’s Island of Umbrella Key, provided the special agent with copies of requisition orders he supposedly placed on March 16, 17, and 23 of 1906, which included: one can of baking powder, eight crates of cabbage, eight sacks of Irish potatoes, three sacks of onions, three sacks of turnips, four crates of bread, two cases of tomatoes, four boxes of macaroni, and one box of cheese. The agents also reported that the company sent barrels of oatmeal, sugar, and coffee to the camps. The engineers confirmed that most of

⁷⁷Percy White Affidavit, *ibid.*

the meals consisted of boiled stews, that the cooks baked cornbread and biscuits in ranges, and that the workers preferred but did not always receive gravy. They documented that at least one meal per week consisted of fish provided by local fishermen. However, the workers asserted the poor quality of the fish in their affidavits. J.C. Meredith contended that: “Of course there have been some complaints about the food, but that is only what can be expected from the workmen.” Provisioning for such a large construction project so far from commercial centers naturally resulted in staples and other foods that were spoiled or inadequate to the needs of men who engaged in heavy labor all day.⁷⁸

Federal agents reported that the company brought all the water for drinking and cooking purposes from Miami in barges towed by steamers. Each camp had one or two water tanks of 5,000-gallon capacity, which the steamers towed and refilled. At camp number 80 on Key West, the company obtained water from the city, three miles distant. Yet the federal agents and the doctor they interviewed (all of whom made visits to the camps in 1906) confirmed that: “The principal illness has been on account of constipation and diarrhea.” One obvious cause of these two conditions was contaminated food and water. Thus poor provisions—a result of the isolation of the camps and negligence of the company—accounted for the suffering of sick workers. Even if the company’s reports are true, the great distances from production centers and the desire to keep costs down meant that food and nourishment in the camps remained quite poor for the majority of workers.⁷⁹

⁷⁸W.C. Wilson and J.C. Meredith Affidavit, *ibid.*

⁷⁹J.C. Meredith Affidavit, *ibid.*

Federal reports consistently mentioned that bosses withheld food from men who did not work, and even the foreman, Clyatt, contended that he witnessed men starve to death in their tents from malnutrition. It is unclear from the reports exactly how reliable the food supply was for the majority of workers, but based upon the consistency of reports, many of the men in the camps experienced poor food provisions at one time or another during their stay in the camps. Reports of local black restaurant owners providing food for hungry men appear throughout the records. One Sophie English in a sworn affidavit testified that she “ran a restaurant at camp # 1 on Key Largo.” She did not specify if the company contracted with her or not, but she served the black work camps, which according to the engineers, the company did not provision. English stated that: “when sick, [the men] were refused food from the commissary because they could not work.” One Joe Dawson, being sick and unable to work, begged continually to be sent out of the camp, but he was denied food and transportation, and English stated that she “fed him from my table the best I could.” She went on to explain that after pleading for two weeks to be released, Dawson died and was buried inside the camp. English also stated that she saw many men “taken up from my table while eating the food I had prepared for them, and taken back sick and driven out to work.” The lack of adequate food contributed to workers’ inability to meet the labor demands of foremen.⁸⁰

As Frank Sabia promised some of the men back in New York, much of the work on the Florida Keys was done with “pick and shovel,” but unlike his promises of “easy” work in a “great place” the men found the labor conditions to be both dangerous and unhealthy. The hardships workers confronted in the Florida Keys contributed directly to their desire to leave the camps. The workers testified to being forced to work at

⁸⁰Sophie English Affidavit, *ibid.*

gunpoint, and that the company starved and even shot men for failure to follow orders. Back in New York, Sabia had specifically promised many of the men better jobs than that of crude manual labor. John Reiss and his friend Charles Zinke, having escaped from the trains at Miami, were arrested and forced by the police at gunpoint onto a boat to Camp number 5 on lower Matecumbe Key. “We arrived at this camp about 4 a.m., and we were told to go to work, which we refused to do. I told them that I was a carpenter and was hired as such, and [I] was told that it didn’t make any difference what they said in New York ‘You take the axe and go to work.’”⁸¹

The work of grading railways included clearing the vegetation, busting the corral rocks and forming embankments on which tracks could be laid. The engineers employed dynamite and tractors in some places, but workers carried out most of the labor of carving a railroad from the island terrain with simple, handheld implements. J.C. Meredith, the construction engineer, confirmed that the workspaces extended from Homestead on the mainland to that of Key West, a distance of 125.35 miles. Of this total distance the engineers designed the railway to be built over 75 miles of land, 25 miles of swamp, and 29.35 miles of water. Meredith also clarified that though machines would be used on much of the grading in the swamps, at least 1.5 miles of the swamp work would be done by hand. The special agent for the federal government reported that: “in drilling the coral preliminary to blasting the men work under a task system, that is they are required to drill so many feet or holes per day. The task varies according to the hardness of the coral.” In addition, many workers suffered injuries and some died from dynamite and gasoline used in clearing the island rocks for the railway.⁸²

⁸¹John Reiss Affidavit, *ibid*;

⁸²J.C. Meredith Affidavit, *ibid*.

The practice of working the men roughly 10 or 11 hours through the hottest part of the day reveals the lack of concern on the part of the company for the men performing such arduous labor in the hot, muggy, sub-tropical environment. The special agent found that most foremen had 15 to 25 men working under their supervision. The foremen testified that the workday began at five a.m. and continued until five p.m. Men were marched at gun point from the tents to the work site and back again at the end of the day, compounding their suffering in the hot humid weather. Though the foremen stated that each “section” of track was roughly three miles long, and the camps situated “about the middle” of these sections, by the end of the project, when the men were perhaps most exhausted, undernourished, or even injured, the walk to work could be as far as two miles each way, sometimes through snake and alligator infested swamps.⁸³

The special agent noted that in some of the camps the men walked long distances through knee-deep water to reach the work site and that this contributed to the poor health of the workers. Workers reported that those men at the Homestead camp suffered more hardships than others, as “they have to get out into the water or mud; 30% are in the mud every day.” Harry Hermanson, the 19 year-old who was taken to Florida under the influence of alcohol paid for by the labor recruiter in Brooklyn, was one of these workers. He testified that he worked on a “sunken island” where—ironically—the boss’s name was Mr. Good. Apparently, upon approaching the worksite in rowboats, Good told the men to jump overboard. When some of the men resisted, Mr. Good then told the men “jump overboard or I will blow your brains out.” Hermanson testified that: “We did jump overboard and worked in the water all day.”

⁸³Ibid.

The water was “up to our wastes and sometimes our necks,” The extreme environment of the Florida Keys comprised perhaps the single most important reason for the company to recruit men who knew little about the place. Men unfamiliar with the hardships of the climate, the landscape, and the horrendous working conditions were more susceptible to manipulative recruiters who reported of beautiful, sunny Florida.⁸⁴

The special agent found that workers had a hard time contending with the natural terrain of the Florida Keys, even without the abuse of their bosses. The rocky coral landscape, which made up the chief ground surface of the islands, was repeatedly cited as a painful to sleep on. The rocks caused men suffering when they were on their feet as well. “The coral of which the Keys are formed, being rough and gritty, is very hard on shoes, a laborer frequently wears out a pair of shoes in a month, sometimes in a week.” And in clearing the land to make way for the railroad the men encountered what they called “poisonous wood” which upon contact irritated the skin, and caused rashes and fevers. Even where there were no poisonous plants, the vegetation was so thick on parts of the island that in order to lay the stakes workers had to chop through what E.T. Clyatt called a “wild jungle.” Clyatt claimed that even after being cleared, the vegetation grew so rapidly that “in the final survey one had to cut a trail to see the stakes which had been laid.”⁸⁵

Conditions for the men were so terrible that even foremen and engineers took note of the workers’ suffering. The foreman Clyatt confirmed most every aspect of the

⁸⁴Harry Hermanson Affidavit, *ibid.* Hermanson’s age, along with evidence that even younger boys of 15 or 11 years of age were being worked in the camps, suggests that younger workers were more easily intimidated into performing the worst jobs. His affidavit includes some of the grossest forms of abuse and though many others suffered similarly, his case is particularly notable.

⁸⁵Poisonwood trees, kin to poison ivy looks like a harmless tree but emit poisonous sap that burns and irritates skin. See Victoria Shearer and Nancy Toppino, *Insiders Guide to the Florida Keys and Key West*, p. 13, Morris Publishing, (2002); E.T. Clyatt Affidavit, in DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

workers' complaints. Clyatt stated that "after having charge of the men on the island for about two months he became very much disgusted with the conditions there, and the orders that he was asked to carry out." He claimed that:

...there was a general understanding from headquarters that no man should be allowed to leave the island, sick or well; that the men should be driven out of their tents at 5 A.M. each morning, and compelled to work whether they were in a condition to do so or not; that one of the commissary rules was that no man should receive any food if he did not work and that, as a result of this rule, many who were ill with fever and suffering from the treatment of the bosses were obliged to lie in their tents in a starving condition.⁸⁶

Clyatt argued that often the reason for illness and inability to work related directly to the environment, explaining: "the mosquitoes were poisonous and many [workers] became very ill because of the insects" and that in addition to the harsh physical environments "the bosses were brutal and beat the workmen often with the axe handle, pointed revolvers at them and threatened them in every way if they seemed too ill to work rapidly." Workers argued that the harsh environment and deplorable treatment led to their decisions to attempt to leave the work camps. As the Department of Justice agent investigating the camps reported:

...perhaps the greatest cause of discontent among the men is that they are totally unused to such conditions as prevail on the Keys. Practically all of these men came from New York and Philadelphia. Hardly any greater contrast could be found within the limits of the United States than that between these large cities and the barren Keys over which the RR extensions [are] being built. The men brooding over their situation, imagine that they are banished on desolate islands far out in the sea and they know that even when they reach the mainland, they have to make a long and expensive journey to reach home. They are lonesome and homesick, tired of the work, tired of their surroundings, and they intend to return home as soon as possible.⁸⁷

⁸⁶Ibid. Clyatt ultimately became the key deponent in the Federal court case, which attempted to expose peonage labor practices in the Florida Keys camps. His testimony as a foreman is key to the confirmation of the many worker affidavits, which complain of harsh treatment in harsh environments. See Daniel, *Shadow of Slavery* (1976).

⁸⁷ Federal Agent Report, "Reasons For Returning North" in DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

The presence of white American, ethnic Italian, Greek, as well as southern black workers distinguishes rural-industrial peonage regimes from other forms of indebted or coercive labor throughout the South. In certain instances the sleeping arrangements in the camps were segregated, and the record shows black workers received harsher treatment. However, the white and Mediterranean workers from New York and Philadelphia became just as vulnerable as southern blacks once they reached the isolated camps, and like the black workers, they remained trapped great distances from their families and social networks back home. Reports that blacks had authority to restrain and coerce white workers at gunpoint remain contested in the records. However, when and if this did take place, it certainly made the conditions of white workers' experience more unusual. The records also show more than one case of local blacks who were not held as workers aiding both black and white workers during their time there, and upon their attempted escapes from the camps. Unlike the white Protestant, Greek and Italian workers, black workers were not brought from the North. It is likely that some of the black workers were prisoners leased by the Florida East Coast Railroad Company, and intersections between peonage and convict labor appear throughout the records related to the Florida Keys work camps. The harsh physical spaces and conditions of the Florida Keys contributed to the manifestation of a similarly horrendous, if not entirely equal experience for workers of all races inside the camps.⁸⁸

The decision to employ white, European immigrant, and southern black laborers reveals the similarly marginalized status each group shared in the eyes of the labor recruiters and foremen. Recruiters and foremen could manipulate leased convicts and the perpetually underemployed to carry out such difficult work. J.C. Meredith, the

⁸⁸ Ibid.

construction engineer, informed the federal agent that when the work first began on the railroad, “negroes only were first employed.” These black workers reportedly came from Georgia and Florida, having fallen victim to similar “false promises” of recruiters who would later convince whites and immigrants from the North to travel south. The black workers too were alarmed to find that the work was on an island, having been told that they were to do railroad work only a few miles from Miami. At that time as many as 500 blacks in three separate camps labored on the railroad extension. This supply of black workers remained inadequate to the railroad’s labor demand and so the FECR and Sabia Co. began to recruit northern men. According to Meredith, white workers were not employed until the later part of October 1905.

The racial ideology of black indolence conflicts greatly with white stereotypes of black physical strength and environmental fortitude. Foremen inside the FECR camps stated that “Negroes made indifferent laborers. They knocked off work a great deal, really averaging about 4 workdays a week.” In clearing the right-of-way for the railroad, the records show that blacks—like whites—had to contend with the same “poisoned wood” found on the islands. The foremen claimed that black workers were immune to the poisonous wood and thus were put to work clearing it. In actuality, foremen forced blacks to clear the poisoned wood because bosses cared less for their health than that of the more costly white workers whom the company transported from distant cities. But foremen recognized southern black workers suffering inside the Keys’ labor camps even if they were supposedly more seasoned to hard labor and acclimated to the harsh climate. They admitted that the blacks came to work in the camps during the heat of summer, which was “the worst season.” Like whites, the principal complaint of

black workers was the mosquitoes, which even their white bosses agreed “were very numerous and ferocious.”⁸⁹

It is clear that although white and black workers shared in their suffering of the Florida Keys physical environment, neither the company nor the bosses treated them equally. The company segregated the work camps by race, and though white workers charged that they worked under the supervision of black bosses, Meredith claimed these accusations were untrue. “We have had only one negro boss, a man named Green, and he is not with us. He was a sub-foremen under a white foreman, and all the men in his gang were negroes.” Most black workers labored under white walking bosses who brutalized them in ways that were already familiar across the South. In camp number 3, one foreman named Albert Frozier reportedly used extremely brutal tactics to coerce black workers. E.T. Clyatt testified that Frozier “beat negroes on the head with a pick axe.” Clyatt stated that many foremen beat, and even killed black workers in the camps, and that he “buried several negroes who have died on the Keys from the treatment.” One Jake Anderson, called ‘Rockhouse’ by his fellow workers, suffered particularly sadistic torture at the hands of a boss by the name of W.C. Grover. Grover shot Anderson in the arm and then made him carry a bucket of water with his wounded arm while Anderson was in what Clyatt called “an almost dying condition.” Grover reportedly killed another black worker named Lindey in the same incident and was

⁸⁹J.C. Meredith Affidavit, *ibid*. It was not stated that the blacks first brought to the Keys were convicts, however, the practice being so common in Florida and Georgia leads one to accept the likely presence of convicts in the camps; Meredith stated that black workers were not sensitive to the poisoned wood, but there is no factual evidence for such a statement.

known to have taken black workers to Cape Sable, where he sold them to another company for his personal profit.⁹⁰

Lindey and Anderson's attempt to help one another against Grover's attacks reveals the reality that, in the absence of protection from the company or the law, workers in the camps assisted each other. The isolation of the camps and the great distances from public services left workers to seek support from each other and local residents, often crossing southern racial lines to find aid and comfort. Jake Anderson testified that: "I stayed at Key Largo eight months and begged to be sent out. Each time I was refused and beaten." He confirmed that he was "shot in the arm by the foreman and did not receive any attention from the company after I was shot but was cared for and fed by one Mr. Dell." Both black and white workers reported that Sophie English, the black restaurant operator, provided food and medical attention to men from the camps. She testified that: "The foremen carried pistols and shot at the men" and stated "To my personal knowledge, Mr. Ball, a foreman, did on several occasions shoot men and break their arms, and I had to care for them and dress their wounds." Sophie English did not deny help to "The white men from New York" whom she fed. "They would slip into our camp and beg for food and water." E.T. Clyatt confirmed that English and others like her offered aid to workers saying: "many died and more would have died had it not been for several negro women who had restaurants in or near the Keys and cooked for the men and gave them food." Local blacks also provided liquor to workers in the camps for a price.⁹¹

⁹⁰E.T. Clyatt Affidavit, *ibid.* In the rural industries of the south employers often paid men who could supply, or capture and return, workers. Grover was reported to have made tidy profits stealing men from the F.E.C.R. camps and selling them into the nearby turpentine farms.

⁹¹Jake Anderson, Sophie English, E.T. Clyatt Affidavit, *ibid.*

The distribution of alcohol to workers in the camps undermined their health and added to their debt. Bosses profited from liquor sales, siphoning men's wages and prolonging their contracts. The camps' isolation from towns made alcohol a precious commodity. Agents and foremen reported that a black man named Parson King operated a saloon in one of the camps where "whiskey and beer were sold in quantity." King ran this saloon with the permission of one of the division engineers, Mr. Dusenberry. E.T. Clyatt testified that Dusenberry argued with King, explaining that he would replace King with another man if he did not get more money from King's "liquor traffic." But liquor was not solely the purview of black entrepreneurs, nor did all the foremen and engineers view it as an optimal business. Both inside and outside the camps, bosses and locals stated that drunken workers threatened the progress of construction and disrupted the community.⁹²

A report entitled "LIQUOR SMUGGLED INTO THE CAMPS" made by the special agent investigating the work camps, stated that in some camps "a good deal of 'boot-legging' business" existed, "while in others there has been none at all." Apparently just before the arrival of the special agent, the foremen reported that a "booze-boat" carrying a reported 60 gallon cask of liquor anchored off the Key all night, and within an hour or two the camp "was in a very hilarious condition." The drunken workers attracted the attention of the camp foremen who sent a man to buy some of the liquor to use as evidence in prosecuting the men who sold it without a license. The camp officers notified the Deputy U.S. Marshal for Dade and Monroe Counties, but it is unclear if any prosecution took place. The foremen claimed that "the drinking bout demoralized the working force," For workers suffering from terrible labor and oppressive conditions,

⁹²Special Agent Report "LIQUOR SMUGGLED INTO THE CAMPS," *ibid.*

alcohol represented an irresistible though unhealthy escape that compounded their repression inside the camps.⁹³

Illegal gambling also occurred widely throughout the FECR camps. Despite official prohibitions, camp officials did not attempt to prevent gambling, as they stated it was “the only amusement in which the men can indulge.” Isolated from more wholesome forms of entertainment, bosses used liquor and gambling to squeeze workers for their wages. Reports also suggested that black gamblers conned the workers, pilfering their wages, however foremen likely knew that any money workers lost in the camp forced them to remain on the job longer. Clyatt testified that: “professional colored gamblers...fleeced the men whenever they had money.” But Clyatt admitted that the foremen allowed these gamblers into the camp, and that they “were allowed to come and go at will.” Both vices operated as part of the system through which bosses restrained workers by purloining their hard-earned wages, and keeping them in the service of the company. Gambling and drinking contributed to the system of entrapment workers experienced in the camps.⁹⁴

Poor provisions, unrelenting toil, and unsafe environmental conditions all contributed to illness and suffering of FECR workers. E.T. Clyatt reported “You could not tell a sick man from a well man.”⁹⁵ Several foremen assured federal agents that the camps were “located in as healthful places as can be found on the Keys.” However, the dreadful conditions workers and foremen reported obviously contradict the projection of good intentions in such statements. The Keys work camps were on the whole terrible places to live and work. Foremen’s claims that men coming from the North had

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Ibid.

“constitutional diseases” they brought to the camps may have partially true. Yet workers clearly suffered illnesses contracted while in the Keys camps and many of the illnesses related directly to the particular physical environment they encountered there.⁹⁶

Initially, medical care did not exist in the camps, but even the health services eventually provided did not nearly meet the needs of workers. J.C. Meredith admitted that the company’s physician made no visits to the camps prior to January 1, 1906. The one doctor finally employed by the company was responsible for thousands of workers in dozens of camps across hundreds of miles. Meredith stated that this physician did make some visits after January 1906, but that “we have no record of the number of calls made by him.” During that same month the company secured a “hospital building” where patients could be housed. Joseph Halpin, a 17 year-old worker, testified that upon falling ill he was put in what he called a “sick tent.” Halpin stayed there for two weeks “but received no medicine, aid or medical attention whatsoever. We simply stayed there.” A report by the resident physician, J.A. Heitlinger M.S., for the months of January through March 1906 claims that he treated 161 patients in the hospital and 127 “out doors.” The reports obviously do not account for all cases of illness, nor all deaths that occurred. It only states that “the number of deaths in the hospital was 4; the number of deaths from accidents was 3.” This does not account for the men reportedly murdered by foremen, or those who died in their tents. The lack of medical care compounded suffering and contributed to deaths resulting from maltreatment and disease.⁹⁷

⁹⁶E.T. Clyatt Affidavit, Report of Federal Agent, “HEALTHFULNESS IN THE CAMPS,” *ibid.*

⁹⁷Joseph A. Halpin Affidavit, *ibid.*

Illnesses directly related to the physical environment of the camps appear most frequently in the physician's report. As noted in the records on food and water in the camps, the principal maladies included constipation, diarrhea, and "bilous fever," likely due to poor dietary provisions and hard labor in hot weather. Among the other chief illnesses experienced in the camps, typhoid fever remained the highest reported, confirming the occurrence of contaminated water in the camps. Nearly all the workers' affidavits as well as those of the foremen E.T. Clyatt, and the black restaurant owner, Sophie English, made it clear that mosquito-born illness occurred consistently in the camps, leading to the death of several workers. Men who suffered from "absesses" due to the extreme heat and lack of hygiene, rashes from poisoned wood, and "lacerated wounds" from clearing underbrush also topped the list. Labor-related injuries also made the report, including cases of "exhaustion," "Dynamite burns," "Gasoline burns," "Contusions," "sprains," and something labeled "Corrupt Practices," obviously not referring to election bribery, most likely meaning venereal diseases. A handful of men earned a free ride home due to their illnesses, though the majority remained, forced to contend with their afflictions in the camps.⁹⁸

The physicians' reports do not mention the race of the patients treated, though the fact that blacks were not "provided for by the company" suggests they likely received little or no real healthcare while in the camps. Racial stereotypes of black workers as more prone to promoting vice and violence do occur in the records, as does evidence that black workers were given access to women that do not appear to have been available to white workers. The federal agent stated that on the whole the black workers in the camps were "well behaved" though he attributed this to the camps being

⁹⁸Special Agent Report, "HEALTHFULNESS IN THE CAMPS," *ibid.*

so well isolated as to prevent black workers' access to distractive habits. Deputy Sheriff Hill arrested several black workers for "boot-legging" and one, Joe Bloomer, for his involvement in a "cutting scrape" with another black worker. Bloomer was fined in Key West but escaped imprisonment due to his "having acted in self-defense." A black worker named Williams who reportedly killed another black worker was tried and subsequently sentenced to the penitentiary. In one extreme case, someone dynamited an unsuspecting black worker while he slept in his tent. The report blamed the murder on another black worker, but no evidence was provided to support the claim. This vicious level of violence did not occur in reports on white workers, suggesting that black workers experienced poorer protection and more abuse than white workers.⁹⁹

One federal agent asserted that "The Negroes are to a large extent afflicted with syphilitic diseases, in some cases in a very advanced stage." This he attributed to the fact that, "In each of the two negro camps there are a dozen or more negro women, who are said to be the wives of the men, and in some cases their kept women." The agent went on to report that some of the women were examined a few days before the visit of the special agent, and four or five of them were deported on account of their diseased condition. The agent reported that syphilitic diseases prevailed among whites as well, but not nearly to the extent that they affected black workers. This may be due to the fact that: "In none of the camps were there any white women and in none of the white camps were there any negroe women." In isolated spaces so far from home, white workers, largely from the North, did not bring their wives, nor were prostitutes allowed in the white camps. So while some whites may have already had syphilis upon their arrival at the camps, the disease was not continuously brought in and spread as it was in

⁹⁹Ibid.

the black camps. The women in the black camps, while perhaps providing some companionship, also contributed to the higher incidence of venereal diseases.¹⁰⁰

The treatment of black workers appears not to be on the whole significantly worse than the treatment of the majority of white workers from the North. The harsh physical environment, along with the attempts by foremen to retain labor, created a degree of similarity in treatment for black and white workers alike. Ethnic and racial ideologies, which placed black and immigrant laborers in a lower caste, relegating them to unstable employment, directly contributed to the manipulation they suffered in the FECR camps. Regardless of relative differences in treatment, exposure to the vagaries of the physical environment and violent foremen created a similarly horrific experience for black and white workers in the Florida Keys work camps.¹⁰¹

The workers who reported their grievances regarding the labor conditions in the camps consistently invoked not only the island geography, but also the harsh physical terrain as barriers to their escape. When workers did manage to leave the camps, either through escape or with the consent of foremen, they found that the southern labor mechanisms of vagrancy laws and chain gangs stood in their way of returning home. Often, local police returned workers to the camps, but in at least a few cases—one notable for the number of men involved—local towns offered support to workers who refused to go back to work in the camps. But more often reports show many locals perceived foreign workers as “vagrants” and “hoboes.” The behavior of workers, and the options they pursued once outside the camps offer a view of their reliance on seasonal

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

migratory labor patterns, as well as the role isolation and physical barriers played in obstructing their attempt to return home.¹⁰²

Sheriffs apprehended some workers who escaped even before arriving at the camps. The local sheriff in Miami arrested Albert Grant, one such worker, and several fellow escapees for vagrancy after they fled the trains. The sheriff placed them in “Snake Creek Prison” where they “slept in a barrel, worked one day and complained about sleeping in a barrel and were told to ‘get out and go back to Miami.’” They walked the 16 miles back to Miami, where they remained for four days. There the sheriffs forced them aboard the boat *Biscayne*, which carried workers to the Keys work camps. Two men jumped off the boat, and the sheriff threatened the others at gunpoint to remain on board. Upon their arrival at the Keys, most of the men were put to work cutting and clearing trees. Grant received light detail as a cook’s helper. After one day of this relatively easy labor he “left them, told nobody, and crawled along the watersedge [*sic*], got some coconut and drank the milk, saw no chance of escaping and went back.” The workers were literally prisoners, at the mercy of the island geography, bosses, and local police.¹⁰³

Once in the camps the men were stuck, but this did not deter them from trying to leave. The foremen, E.T. Clyatt stated that one of the locals, a manager of a fruit farm five miles from Planters, Key Largo, “has a small dock, and repeated requests are made to him from distressed men to be permitted to go out on their pier and signal to passing vessels.” But the men did not merely hope for help from ships passing by. They also appealed to the local fishermen who owned small sailboats and rowboats in the waters

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³Albert Grant Affidavit, *ibid.*

around the Keys. Some of these ‘conchs’ as foremen called them “would take the men away from the islands at night, for \$1.00 each.” When the company discovered this support, Clyatt stated the order came to “shoot any fishermen who steals our men.” One foremen asserted that he would “riddle their boat with bullets” if he caught them helping the workers to escape.¹⁰⁴

The same dense tropical vegetation that proved difficult and dangerous to clear by hand provided cover to men brave enough to attempt to flee the camps. The men often utilized what some called the “wild jungle” to aid them in their attempted escapes. Clyatt told agents: “The men would sometimes hide in the bushes sick, and begging for assistance, or pity.” Though simply hiding in the swamps did not guarantee escape from the islands themselves, it offered a short reprieve from hard labor and violent foremen. Bosses caught many men attempting to escape to the woods and drove them back at gunpoint. The survival and escape of the men often depended on the support of locals like Sophie English, who Clyatt confirmed gave the men food to “take to the swamps, where they would hide until they might steal away on one of the boats belonging to the conchs.” These local fishermen provided the only real opportunity for escape from the island labor camps.¹⁰⁵

Some men attempted to escape by stealing small boats to navigate on their own without the guidance of fishermen. For many men, even getting away on the boats proved too difficult in their weakened condition. Robert Martin tried to leave by boat, but being too sick, he did not get away before “the boss came and made me get out, gave me a thrashing.” After fainting in the midst of subsequent work, Martin was “sick a

¹⁰⁴E.T. Clyatt Affidavit, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*

week in my tent with hardly anything to eat” and even then he tried to escape to a restaurant in the black camps, the boss captured him and drove him back to the worksite. “I tried to work but got stricted [*sic*] and the men took me to the company’s launch and brought me again back to the camp.” Even when workers managed to take to the sea on boats, the unfamiliar waters presented a great obstacle. Clyatt reported that in August of 1905, some men tried to escape in a rowboat, having been refused a pass. “After drifting around in the sea without provisions and no drinking water for days,” they encountered a local pilot named Tug Pelton, who reported their whereabouts to the company. The company captured them and on their return a boss named Froxier kicked them and ordered the men “thrown overboard, but they were rescued by their companions.” Such harrowing tales illustrate how the ocean waters constituted an integral component of the FECR camps’ peonage labor regime.¹⁰⁶

Several bosses and labor agents readily acknowledged that the physical environment presented a significant barrier to workers’ escape. The dense tropical foliage formed as formidable a barrier as the ocean currents. E.T. Clyatt confirmed the reports of the workers stating: “On the eastern part of the island there was a line schooner and the mail boat that made 2 trips a week to Key West but it was almost impossible for the workmen to get to that side of the island because of the density of the undergrowth magnolia; in fact it was a wild jungle.” Thus the Florida Keys provided a uniquely convenient space for the company hoping to retain labor by limiting workers’ ability to leave of their own volition.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶Robert Martin Affidavit, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷E.T. Clyatt Affidavit, *ibid.*

The physical barriers reinforced the legal constraints created by vagrancy laws. Max Lipetz, one of the labor recruiters working for Frank Sabia in New York stated: [Triay] was talking with us and he said ‘When they go down there they will have to work for transportation; if not they’ll be put in the chain gang. [Sabia] nodded his head and answered “else have to swim 60 miles.”’ Company officials’ documentation of their awareness that isolated and treacherous physical spaces functioned to retain labor in the Florida Keys offers a crucial window into the intersections between labor and environment in the modern South.

Labor migration and mobility characterized much of the proto-industrial economy of the South. Vagrancy laws allowed for the return and further exploitation of workers who did somehow manage to escape amounting to a private-public system of exploitation. The nexus of peonage and convict labor appear throughout the historical literature on the modern South. This held true for the Florida Keys as well. Such vagrancy laws existed as a mechanism of employers to acquire large labor forces for harvest picking or difficult proto-industrial labor. One of the major disincentives for workers leaving a labor camp was the likelihood of arrest by local law enforcement for vagrancy. E.T. Clyatt confirmed that, “in fact all the sheriffs on the East Coast of Florida are practical servants of the company.” Many workers who escaped from the Florida Keys work camps fell victim to vagrancy laws and subsequent convict labor. These vagrancy laws stood in the way of workers’ preference short-range migration, known as “shifting” which allowed them nominal independence from poor working conditions, low wages, and coercion. Some workers escaped both the worst horrors of the railroad work camps, and the restrictions imposed on them by vagrancy laws,

integrating themselves into the migratory seasonal southern labor force, and working their way home through jobs in various rural industries.¹⁰⁸

Clyatt testified that constables L.M. Nicholson, and one Mr. Wilson arrested escaping northern workmen upon the slightest provocation, often under false pretenses. He reported that a convict camp existed at Ogus, only eleven miles from Miami. The justice of the peace W.S. Ill charged men with vagrancy, and gave them the option of returning to the company work camps or being sent to the chain gangs, where often they were “then leased again to the railroads or the surrounding turpentine camps.”¹⁰⁹

Sam Rosen went to Florida in November of 1905 with the initial shipment of New Yorkers recruited by Sabia Co. After working for three weeks without pay, Rosen tried to quit, was arrested, and taken to a judge who ordered him to return to the camps or go to jail. Rosen’s affidavit states that he “chose jail.” The court sentenced him to roadwork at Miami alongside black convicts. After 10 days, the authorities released him for good behavior, but with no money, food, or housing, he went back to work on the FECR where they promised him \$1.50 a day and \$3.00 board. After working two weeks laying pipes in the ground, he asked for his pay, but company officials told him that after deducting his transportation costs and board the company owed him no money. This was often the sort of provocation that drove men to run.¹¹⁰

Albert Grant, John Reiss, and Charles Zinke all knew each other in New York. Together they signed up for work at the Sabia Co., and together they boarded the trains

¹⁰⁸E.T. Clyatt Affidavit, *ibid*; Douglass Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black People in American from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Doubleday, 2008); Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed: America’s Underclass from the Civil War to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

¹⁰⁹E.T. Clyatt Affidavit, *ibid*. Though it appears that some men were sent to convict labor camps for ‘vagrancy,’ it’s unclear how often this occurred, and how many of the men working at the Florida Keys camp were technically convicts. It seems foremen would want to avoid losing workers to other local work projects.

¹¹⁰Sam Rosen Affidavit, *ibid*.

to Florida. Their stories are similar in that they all managed to escape at some point, fleeing from the Keys work camps. Yet all did work at the Keys camps at some point, and all were confined to chain gangs at various times throughout their journeys.. A foreman allowed Grant a pass from camp to visit Miami, where the sheriffs ordered him and several other men to leave town. The men walked 70 miles to Palm Beach where they were arrested and put to work on the local chain gang, where Grant suffered hunger, illness, and physical abuse at the hands of the guards. With money from his mother, Grant paid his fines and made it to Jacksonville, where he worked on the Clyde Rail Line for one month.¹¹¹

Reiss's friend Charles Zinke escaped at Miami as well, but was arrested and sentenced to work on the roads at Snake Creek. The sheriff eventually took the convicts, including Zinke, to the FECR boats and forced them aboard at gunpoint. Zinke labored on the Florida Keys railroad, but at some point earned a pass from the camp and walked from Miami to Palm Beach, where the police arrested him and put him to work on the chain gang. After eight days he "stole away" and caught a train to Jacksonville. There he worked on the railroad for 11 days and earned five dollars pay. His family sent him money and he returned to New York by train, arriving on April 17th 1906.¹¹²

Joseph A. Halpin, the 17 year-old from Brooklyn, managed to escape by hiding on one of the company boats. Police caught Halpin and put him before one "Jail Judge Brooks." Given the option of returning to the FECR camp or working on the chain gang building roads at Monroe, he chose to return to the Key's camp number 82 on Ramrod Key for one month. There he fell ill and bosses left him to starve in a tent.

¹¹¹Albert Grant Affidavit, *ibid*.

¹¹²*Ibid*.

Eventually Halpin left the camps and found work with the Burnham Clam Chowder Co. at Caxambas Island, earning \$1.50 a day. He reported the rest of the story in his affidavit:

I worked one month and went to fort Myers where I caught a freight train and went to Lakeland, Fla. where I was arrested for vagrancy. A contractor came to us and said 'if you work for me, I will get you out of jail.' We told him we would, he got us out and he told us to walk up the tracks for about two miles where we could find the Atlantic Coast Line camp. Two other men and I caught a freight train made our way to Danford Fla. we got on a boat at Danford, Fla. and left for Jacksonville. We boarded another freight train for Waycross. We were arrested in this place for vagrancy and were sentenced to work in the chain gang, hard labor, and we had to cut trees and collect the turpentine.

After serving his time, Halpin went to Savannah, Georgia where he found work on a railroad at Millen, Georgia. He stayed on there three weeks and then stole rides on freight trains to New York. He arrived in New York on "Decoration Day, May 29, 1906." The men's experiences highlight the common use of vagrancy laws to retain labor and the widespread use of coerced workers in the extractive industries and construction sector. However, workers' strategic migration eventually improved their situation by returning home to family, friends, and familiar physical environments.¹¹³

The assistance and support from family members suggests migrant laborers were not as shiftless and vagrant as foremen argued. The great distances between the work camps of the South and the homes and families of the workers from northern cities made foreign workers ideal for exploitative labor regimes. Workers' inability to communicate easily with their families back home made them easier to constrain. Lipetz stated: "Hundreds of people came to complain while I was there [Sabia Co. New York, NY], fathers and mothers would come in and cry and say that their sons had gone away and had never been heard of and that they had received letters relating the miseries that they were experiencing in the Keys." One woman, whose husband went to the camps,

¹¹³Joseph A. Halpin Affidavit, *ibid.*

wrote repeatedly but received no answer. She finally complained in person to Mr. Triay, the recruiter who had sent her husband south, but he ignored her. Lipetz reported that “at last, despairing, [she] came to the office and made a scene when [Triay] said he would telegraph the chief engineer at Miami. I don’t think the man was ever found.” Lipetz added, “Mothers and sisters would come and cry daily. [Triay] and [Sabia] would joke about it afterwards.” The inability of workers’ families to gain information from employers made it difficult for them to help workers escape the camps. But families repeatedly acted, despite difficulty, to pressure Sabia Co. to provide answers regarding the whereabouts and condition of their loved ones.¹¹⁴

The great distances between New York and the Florida Keys made it nearly impossible for families to physically find their loved ones and return them home. However in at least one case, this did occur. Amanda Hermanson, Harry Hermanson’s mother, testified that she went looking for Harry when he didn’t come home in November 1905. Local bartenders at both Burn’s Liquor Store on the corner of President and Van Brunt St., and Higgins at Hamilton Ave. and 14th St., informed her that: “a young man had been around Brooklyn picking up boys to go south.” She took a train to Jacksonville and then Miami where she checked in with the FECR engineers, who dismissed her inquiries. She then hired a boatman to take her to Miami; and there, after she paid Harry’s transportation costs, the company released him to her. Most of the poor immigrant families whose loved ones went to the Keys did not have the resources and determination of Mrs. Hermanson. Still, documentation of several cases of mothers and family members sending money to their loved ones in the camps shows the

¹¹⁴Max Lipetz Affidavit, *ibid*; Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985).

level of their commitment. Hermanson's persistence and activism is emblematic not only of the love and concern felt by family members, but also of the strong ties and pragmatic intelligence that characterized immigrants who traveled long distances and overcame great hardships to live and labor in the United States.¹¹⁵

In at least one significant case, several men who the company transported to the Florida Keys refused to go to work in the railroad camps. Claiming that they had been promised higher wages, they managed to avoid being coerced into working in the camps by remaining in the town of Key West and garnering the support of locals, including the mayor, citizens, and a Cuban cigar-makers union. This strike of sorts illustrates workers' desire to find reasonable work in a seasonable climate, and their ability, through mobility, to avoid coercion. T.J. Russell, the Secretary of the Central Labor Assembly of Key West, gave a report to the federal agent investigating the camps in which he stated that the men "claimed that they had been shanghaied." He went on to say, "I think some of them really were surprised to find themselves on an island. I am sure some of them thought they were outside the U.S." The men went to the city of Key West to see the Mayor, Geo L. Babcock, who gave them permission to sleep in the local baseball diamond. A group of local Cuban cigar-makers led by one Mr. Gonzalez collected money and provisions from local citizens to support the workers, whose primary concern was the disparity between the wages promised them in New York and those they actually received in the camps. The men showed local officials the circulars passed out back north stating that they would be paid \$1.25 per day. The city of Key

¹¹⁵Amanda Hermanson Affidavit, in DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

West contacted the engineers at the FECR camps and a process of negotiation over wages, labor, and provisions in the town ensued.¹¹⁶

Russell reported that: “The first impulse of the people here was to help the men.” Though the men refused to go to work on the railroad, many of them found work at various odd jobs around Key West, laboring as carpenters, day laborers, etc. Some even scabbed during a carpenters’ strike underway in the city. But though the townspeople did not believe the men should be mistreated, the reality of ‘foreign men’ with no families or employment living in the area left many in Key West worried. Russell stated that the townspeople “were afraid of them, as they were considered a dangerous class.” Hundreds of men “loafed around town, and many got drunk and disorderly—in fact the large majority were bums.” Complaints of the use of profane and indecent language “on the streets” appeared repeatedly in the record. Russell went on to state that: “The people were afraid to leave their houses open, as is the custom here.” The town appointed a committee, who asked the workers to select five representatives with whom they would meet. This committee determined that “there were two factions among the men. The majority were hobos...but some of the younger men were of a better class.” The committee expressed that unless the men went to work on the railroad there was no more they could do for them, though they did arrange a local resident, William B. Curry, to open a restaurant for the men “at a charge of 45 cts a day, \$3.25 a week. The men agreed to this price.” The singular support given to workers by the citizens of Key West, followed by their subsequent unwillingness to truly absorb the workers into the

¹¹⁶Special Agent Report, *ibid.*

community, shows the fundamental differences posed by culture and class, as well as the townspeople's prioritization of their own safety.¹¹⁷

Vagrancy law and opportunity created by migration made up the two dominant aspects of workers' experience in the vicinity of the work camps. The very ability to leave work made the men "hobos" in the eyes of the residents, and subject to arrest by local officials. The deputy sheriff of Dade County, A.P. Core, reported that: "the majority of the men were drunkards and deadbeats, and won't work unless they have to." And Deputy Sheriff W.H. Morris, also of Dade County stated "...I have always called on [foreign workers] to conduct themselves properly or leave the county. But many do not heed this advice." Yet some men managed to avoid both harsh labor and legal punishment. Many walked to North Miami, as Morris stated, "...because it is outside the city limits" where they lived at "cheap restaurants" and purchased "whisky at low dives." Rumors circulated among the men that "a cordon of guards around Miami" prevented them from leaving. However, many still left the town rather than go to work in the camps, prompting Russell to claim that "Between Ft. Lauderdale and Palm Beach the tramps have stripped the fruit farms of fruit." But many of the men did not escape Florida without being caught in the legal system of coerced labor.¹¹⁸

James T. Sanders, the Municipal Judge at Miami, provided statistics showing a total of 789 convictions for "Drunk and Disorderly, Fighting & rioting, Vagrancy, using profane and indecent language, Trespassing, and Contempt of Court." The large majority of the men could not pay the fines and thus were forced to work off their fines at 50 cents per day. They worked on the local roads and slept in a crowded "stockade"

¹¹⁷Ibid.

¹¹⁸W.H. Morris Affidavit, *ibid.*

that a federal agent described as “a large frame structure, the floor containing straw on which the men slept.” However, men did manage to escape the stockades by cutting through the wire on the windows with hand-fashioned devices. The agent, attempting to show the negative consequences of peonage labor patterns on local citizens, reported of the Keys camp escapees that “...the people here and at towns above here were scared by this great influx of people such as they had never had before.” However, a local judge stated: “So far as serious breaches of the peace are concerned, these hoboos were the best lot I ever saw. 95% of them were guilty only of drinking and of swearing on the street.”¹¹⁹

The tropical climate and undeveloped landscape of the Florida Keys informed Henry M. Flagler’s decision to develop the FECR railroad to support tourism and industrial transportation in the region, just as the idea of gainful employment in pleasant weather amid natural abundance led many men to sign up for work on the FECR at Sabia’s office in New York City. However, the great majority of the men who went to work in the FECR camps could not avoid the brutality of forced labor or the difficulties of the scorching tropical sun, jagged corral terrain, and deadly organisms, not to mention rotten food, miserable sleeping conditions, and inadequate or nonexistent healthcare. The affidavits of workers in the Keys resound with the suffering they experienced at the hands of violent bosses and the torment of the tropical landscape, pests, and disease on the islands. Struggling to work in water, cutting poisonous underbrush amid swarms of mosquitoes drove workers to desperation, leading them to resist foremen, and attempt escape from the islands. The difficulty of the labor regimes and the physical environment facilitated workers’ resistance and

¹¹⁹Federal Agent Report, *ibid.*

reinforced foremen's enforcement of peonage schemes to retain workers. The seascapes aided the retention of most workers though ultimately many managed to leave the islands.

That many men upon leaving the camps notified federal officials leading to investigation and a legal suit against the Sabia Co. proves workers' resiliency and their pragmatic utilization of federal agencies to expose unfair labor practices. However, the failure of Progressive reformers in the Department of Justice to achieve a legal victory against the Sabia Co. proves the strength of state and federal support for industrial enterprise and the difficulty of proving the workers were forced to labor against their will due to indebtedness or threat of violence. The Sabia case was only the beginning of the DOJ's long initiative to prove peonage was widely practiced in rural industrial operations.

In the same year, seven hundred miles north, deep in the Great Southern Pine Forest of Alabama, another Progressive industrialist of Standard Oil fame utilized the same system of labor trafficking and peonage to supply a newly constructed railroad and lumber mill. Like the tropical island seascapes of the Florida Keys, the great southern pine forests informed industrialists' vision of transforming nature into profits. But unlike the FECR project, the modern lumber industry created a uniquely dangerous set of environmental and labor conditions that workers were both uninformed about and ill prepared to handle. Though some similarities exist in the strategies of recruiting, trafficking, and retaining labor in the FECR and Alabama lumber camps, the forests facilitated a distinct and more fluid set of social and environmental relationships among employers, workers, foremen, and animals that allowed Progressive reformers to expose

abuses and achieve an ostensible legal victory in the struggle over peonage labor in the rural industrial south.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Pete Daniel, *Shadow of Slavery* (1976). The Sabia case began when a New York grand jury indicted Frank Sabia, Edward Triay, and two other men under the 1866 slave-kidnapping law. Defendants admitted to peonage, arguing that slavery could not exist because it was illegal. The case failed due to the bribery and disappearance of witnesses and an unsympathetic court.

Chapter Three:

“In the woods they can do anything they want to and no one can see them but God:” The Jackson Lumber Company’s Alabama peonage labor camps 1906-1907.

On a warm spring day in 1904, former Governor of Maryland and accomplished lumberman E.E. Jackson, along with several of his associates, traveled to Alabama to view their massive holdings of southern yellow pine forests. The party took a private train car owned by the President of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad, Milton H. Smith, to a small outpost on the end of the line known as Opp, Alabama. The *American Lumberman* journal wrote that the men spent two days “in the timber.” Clad in fine suits and surrounded by lumber industry journalists, they walked the forest landscapes and discussed their plans to establish the nation’s finest lumber operation. As an entrepreneur and leading figure within the expanding southern lumber industry, Jackson possessed the natural and financial resources to carry out his vision of a productive, efficient, and well-ordered lumber mill in the woods of Alabama. But in order to extract southern timber, Jackson’s company of managers, foremen, and laborers faced the difficult task of converting the yellow pine into saleable lumber goods. The enormous size and scope of the Jackson Company’s production required transporting and managing both laborers and machinery across thousands of miles, deep into remote forests, creating a uniquely dangerous set of working conditions.¹²¹

In the summer of 1906, one year after Theodore Roosevelt founded the U.S. Forest Service and laid out his conservationist policy for the national forests, a conflict of local and national importance arose over labor in the Jackson Lumber Company’s

¹²¹“Model Sawmill Plants, XXIII.” *American Lumberman* Vol. 60 (November, 1900) 28-29; “The Personal History and Public and Business Achievements of One Hundred Eminent Lumbermen of the United States,” *American Lumberman*, Third Series, (Chicago, 1906) 391, 393; “Woman Will Help in War Against Trusts,” *New York Times*, September 15, (1907).

forests in Alabama. Several Jackson Lumber Company workers subjected to the forest's under-developed landscape, and suffering from poor provisions and brutal labor management, defied the lumber camp foremen and their bloodhounds, escaped into the woods, and notified federal authorities that they were held against their will, whipped, and forced to work at gunpoint. Following investigations into the southern lumber industry, in November of 1906 the Department of Justice prosecuted the Manager at Lockhart, William S. Harlan, and several of the labor foremen and unlike the failed case against Frank Sabia, ultimately the federal courts convicted Harlan and O'Hara of exploiting their labor. The Department of Justice files relating to peonage investigations place the conflict over peonage labor inside Jackson's forest labor camps squarely within the wider movement for labor reform and offer a window into the inhumane labor regimes that characterized southern rural-industrial enterprises.¹²²

The lumber industry media, federal investigators, and workers all used environmental rhetoric to describe both the opportunity they envisioned in the great southern forests. Workers and reformers employed notions of wilderness to describe the suffering and abuse they experienced in Jackson's forests. Lumbermen employed notions of *man over nature* to highlight the development of an efficient industrial town in the forest. The lumber industry media viewed the Lockhart operation as a premier example of what Gifford Pinchot called man's "wise use" of nature. However, the isolation of southern forests allowed foremen to coerce laborers through debt peonage and physical violence. Workers resisted their exploitation, using the woods to escape and report foremen's abuses. Workers and Reformers characterized southern forest industry labor camps in environmental language conflating *forests as wilderness, men as beasts*, and

¹²² Mary Quackenbos Affidavit in DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1).

animals as workers. Jackson's lumber camps operated as dynamic spaces where divergent human interests clashed within the natural confines of the forest. The physical environment inside Jackson's forest's facilitated peonage labor regimes and contributed to workers' miserable condition. The same forests that isolated men from legal protection allowed them cover in their escape. Ultimately, reformers and journalists used the Jackson forests as an allegory for the danger and disaster that peonage labor regimes represented.¹²³

In several ways, the case of the Jackson Lumber Company's peonage labor regime resembled the mechanisms that labor recruiters and foremen in the FECR camps carried out to supply workers for their project. Recent European ethnic immigrants from Hungary, Greece, and Russia along with Americans from the North signed up for jobs based on false representations of the southern climate and landscapes. Once inside the great remote forests, armed guards and vicious woods bosses bound them through debt and violence to labor on railroad construction and timbering operations, forcing men to flee when they could and report abuses to federal officials. However, the story of the Jackson labor camps stands apart from the FECR camps in that the forests facilitated a more contentious struggle between workers and foremen and blurred the lines between men and animals.

The distinct physical features of the southern pine forest and the mixed labor system in the camps created unique frictions among workers and woods bosses. The

¹²³ Ibid; For a discussion of Environmental History methodologies see Gunther Peck, "The Nature of Labor: Fault Lines and Common Ground in Environmental and Labor History," *Environmental History* 11, no. 2. (April, 2006) 212-238; See also William Cronon, "Modes of Prophecy and Production: Placing Nature in History," *The Journal of American History* 76, no. 4 (March, 1990) 1122-1131; For discussion of Padrones and foreign contract labor in western industrial camps see Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880-1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

dense forests that frightened men and added to their agony also aided workers in their escape, aggravating bosses. The integrated character of work teams and sleeping arrangements generated ethnic conflict inside the camps between workers. And the landed access to the forest allowed reformers to more easily enter the camps and expose abuses there. The forest industry represented a unique business interest of local property owners, employers, and national industrial magnates like Jackson. Their regional political power formed an important opposition to reformers seeking to prosecute abuses in the lumber industry.

Furthermore, unlike the static island archipelago of the Florida Keys, the forests of southern Alabama allowed a much more fluid set of labor and environmental relationships than did the FECCR camps. The unique mingling of modern machinery in the forests created a distinctly dangerous working environment for men in the Lockhart camps. Saws and logging trains both eased the timbering process and represented dangerous threats to men's safety and health. The history of black labor and residence in the southern forests meant that immigrants worked with and sometimes were guarded and abused by black men, who were both bosses and laborers in the camps. And the widespread use of horses, oxen, and dogs inside the forest labor camps informed men's sense of their own dehumanization into chattel, and highlighted animals' multi-varied role as workers, companions, and extensions of the woods boss. Ultimately the nature of forest labor, the human and non-human workers, and the actions of the lumber industry enabled progressive reformers' attempts to expose peonage labor regimes in the Jackson labor camps.

Lumber industry journalists viewed the physical environment of southern pine forests as the ideal space for development of industrial lumber operations. The Jackson

Lumber Company, like Henry M. Flagler planned to develop the town of Lockhart in a broad region of Long Leaf Pine forest that covered nearly three-fifths of Alabama and Florida west of the Appalachia River. The lumber industry media touted the timber industry as bringing economic, industrial, and social development to the forest. The company town included “the provision of comfortable homes and pleasant surroundings, for the employees.” In addition the *American Lumberman* noted “the fine and healthful climate and fertility of the soil will assist materially in making Lockhart an ideal industrial community.” Unlike the island seascape of the Florida Keys, lumbermen believed the high and fairly level landscape of the Jackson forest lent itself to railroad construction and easy access to internal and foreign markets. To industrialists and lumbermen, the Jackson Company’s Lockhart operation represented progress for the region of the Deep South and the nation as a whole.¹²⁴

Until the 1880’s, northern and western lumber dealers had expressed doubts about the quality of southern lumber. They viewed southern timber as weaker due to the warm climate. However, by 1893, forty-one percent of the nation’s softwood came from the South, and builders used southern pine in construction of the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago that year. By the end of the nineteenth century, American lumbermen viewed southern timber as an enormous untapped resource. In 1900, Alabama contained over 5,000 square miles of Longleaf Pine forests referred to by

¹²⁴ Historical actors, historians and ecologists identify three distinct forest belts in the United States. The Northern Belt of coniferous pine forest stretches from New England through New York, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. The Central pine belt begins at the Chesapeake of Virginia and runs through North Carolina, Northern Alabama, Mississippi and Arkansas. The Southern pine belt stretches from southeastern Virginia all the way to eastern Texas and includes shortleaf, loblolly, and slash pine, all of which were marketed as “southern” or “yellow pine.” Southern forest industries provided timber and pitch tar to European markets beginning in the seventeenth century and by 1900 Chicago and the eastern U.S. consumed much of southern timber. See Richard Walter Massey Jr. *A History of the Lumber Industry in Alabama and West Florida 1880-1914*, (Vanderbilt University Press, 1960) p. 28; "Model Sawmill Plants, XXIII." *American Lumberman* Vol. 60 (November 10 1900. 28-29; "The Story of a Yellow Pine Sextet." *American Lumberman* Vol. 73 (March, 1904) 43-74.

the lumber industry as ‘yellow pine.’ The ecological characteristics of the Long Leaf Pine forests contributed to lumbermen’s opportunistic visions of the region. Alabama’s South-western Pine Hills’ climate of hot summers, mild winters and frequent fires kept down underbrush and regenerated its sandy soil. Visitors described the Long Leaf Pines as having “stately trunks [that] rise 40-60 feet and then spread out their dense foliage, which joins above like the arches of a cathedral. There is little or no undergrowth, and the view fades into a maze of the column-like trunks.”¹²⁵

Historically, Southerners viewed forests as open to public access, and southern states did little to regulate them until the late nineteenth century when industrial consolidation and a national labor surplus made extraction profitable. Individual landowners and the slaves of wealthy planters cleared forests for cotton lands and used the woods for recreational hunting and fishing, as well as to supplement their diet. The Southern Homestead Act of 1862 allowed the clearing of forests as long as residents occupied the land. By the 1890s fake homesteaders working for timber companies cut nearly half of all timber illegally. Companies paid homesteaders to set up crude shacks, clear-cut timber, and deliver it to market via streams and rivers.¹²⁶

The vast isolated and unregulated character of southern forest landscapes presented both opportunity and challenges for emerging industrial lumbermen, who sought to extract timber and transport it to eastern markets. Prior to 1900, the federal government did not attempt to regulate southern forests, and southern juries “would

¹²⁵ Richard Walter Massey Jr., *A History of the Lumber Industry in Alabama and West Florida 1880-1914* (Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 1960) p. 28; F.V. Emmerson, “The Southern Long-leaf Pine Belt,” *The Geographical Review*, Vol. 2 (January, 1919) 81; Roland M. Harper, *Forests of Alabama 1878-1966* (Tuskaloosa: University of Alabama, 1943); A.E. Parkins, *The South: It’s Economic and Geographic Development*, (New York: J. Wiley & Sons; London, Chapman & Hall, 1938).

¹²⁶ Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Massey, *A History of the Lumber Industry*: (1960) 30-35.

not convict a man for taking timber from public lands.” In the 1880s an organized group known as the Slater Gang stole timber on federal and private lands around Big Escambia Creek near Pensacola, Florida. D.D. Hall, a local cattleman, reported that the Slater Gang stole steers and used them to transport lumber to creeks, where they could ship it to markets at Pensacola. The Slater Gang avoided arrest and prosecution, disappearing by the early 1900s. In general, local homesteaders cut timber illegally or set fires to clear woods for agriculture, defying the efforts of industrial lumbermen to stop these practices.¹²⁷

The economic, technological, and social changes that characterized the rise of industry in the United States developed uniquely in the rural isolated landscapes of the Deep South. Northern investors such as Rockefeller and Morgan financed much of the rural industrial development of the Gilded Age South. But southern industry was not an entirely new phenomenon, and southern businessmen participated with northern capital to bring industrial development to modernize the South. Governor E.E. Jackson of Maryland—a conservationist, Methodist, and Republican—represented the consummate southern businessman, expanding his business mightily through vertical integration within the lumber industry. The company town of Lockhart embodied the extractive conservationist ideology, which viewed southern forests as gardens to be cultivated for human use. The lumber industry media portrayed southern forests as untouched serene spaces ripe for cultivation by high-minded management. As a leader

¹²⁷ Willis G. Clark, *Memorial Record of Alabama*, (Madison, Wisconsin, Brant & Fuller, 1893), Vol.1, 303; Interview with Mr. Ed Leigh McMillan and John Kent, a local resident Nov. 16, 1949, in Massey, *A History of the Lumber Industry*, (1960).

in the lumber industry, Jackson expanded his business in the late 19th century and grew as powerful and reputable as many of his northern counterparts.¹²⁸

As an owner and entrepreneur, Jackson primarily viewed southern forests as commodities in the abstract. He contended with the scale and scope of southern forests through expansion, consolidation, and employment of foreign contract labor. In 1870, the Jackson flooring mill in Baltimore was the leading business in the city—and a Washington, D.C. factory made flooring and cabinets for the emerging middle-class housing boom of the early 20th century. In 1874, Jackson bought timber in Nansemond County, Virginia and built the first railroad in the South used exclusively for lumbering purposes. Jackson purchased additional timber in Suffolk County Virginia, as well as Gates County, North Carolina, near the Chowan River. In 1886, Jackson grew interested in Alabama’s Long Leaf Pine forests, “backing his faith by extensive purchases.” With help from investors in Pennsylvania, he began buying timberlands in Alabama and Florida and later organized the Jackson Lumber Company and the company town of Lockhart, Alabama.¹²⁹

In keeping with industrial trends toward consolidation, in 1904 Jackson merged his business with E.S. Crossett, C.W. Gates, J.W. Watzek, and W.S. Harlan to create a vast southern empire of lumber operations throughout Alabama, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Jackson sold these men 150,000 acres of timberland as well as shares in Jackson Lumber Company. That year E.S. Crossett of Davenport, Iowa having earned

¹²⁸ *American Lumberman*, Third Series, (Chicago, 1906) 391-393; See also C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South* (1951); Gavin Wright, *Old South New South* (1986).

¹²⁹ Northeastern trade in wood flooring drove human interest in converting naturally grown timber of wilderness spaces into secondary natural products to customize domestic spaces in cities and suburbs. See: William Cronon, “Modes of Prophecy and Production: Placing Nature in History,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (March, 1990) 1122-1131; See also William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis*: (1991) 27-30, 128-131, 152-153; *American Lumberman*, Third Series, (Chicago, 1906) 391-393.

his wealth in the Wisconsin timbering industry, founded Fordyce Lumber Company in Fordyce Arkansas. By sharing management and profits with mid-western lumbermen, Jackson proved himself a major contender in the industry, establishing a powerful reputation and securing national investment partnerships that spread management responsibilities across the entire southern yellow pine region. Lumber industry media characterized Crossett and Jackson as “practically the same management” overseeing operations in several large lumber tracts throughout the South. In 1904, the lumber industry journal *American Lumbermen* described Jackson and Crossett as part of “The Sextet” of the biggest sawmill owners in America.¹³⁰

Lumbermen such as Jackson utilized a common, though complex, language in their description of timber operations when they employed the popular Gilded Age environmental idiom of *man over nature*. They portrayed the Lockhart operation as the height of technological advancement and civilization brought to the underdeveloped spaces of the southern forests. Industry media touted the scope and sophistication of the Lockhart operation, its modern machinery, mass production and mechanization of labor as signs of progress converting the unused wilderness into a space of economic opportunity, social advancement, and production of domestic consumer goods. *American Lumberman* reported: “Lockhart is as a sawmill town should be—in the woods—but it is in the very center of civilization.” The modern technology that Jackson transported to Lockhart made the forest a truly rural-industrial space where both technological

¹³⁰ “The Story of a Yellow Pine Sextet,” *American Lumberman* Vol. 73 (March 1904) 43-74; For more on forests and timbering see: Thomas R. Cox, Robert S. Maxwell, Phillip Drenon Thomas, and Joseph J. Malone, *This Well-Wooded Land: Americans and Their Forests from Colonial Times to the Present* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985); Michael Williams, *Americans and Their Forests: A Historical Geography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Harold K. Steen, *The U.S. Forest Service: A History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976); David A. Clary, *Timber and the Forest Service* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986); William G. Robbins, *American Forestry: A History of National, State, and Private Cooperation* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985).

advancement and wilderness came together in the name of human progress. Industry journalists wrote that the Lockhart plant consisted of “two [saw] bands and a 48 inch gang [saw], with a capacity of 250,000 feet in a 22 hour run and will later be increased in size to have approximately that capacity in an 11 hour run.” The plant also had a planning mill equal in capacity to the saw mill, and brick dry kilns with capacity of 160,000 feet per day powered by brick-housed boiler plant of 72 inch by 18 foot boilers, “8 of these will be required for saw mill and dry kilns and 2 more for planning mill,” they reported. For lumbermen, technology represented the cornerstone of new possibilities in industrial production.¹³¹

The process of envisioning, managing and producing the material of southern forests into commodities for the industrial market largely defined lumbermen’s relationship to southern forest labor spaces. The *American Lumberman* journal sold the advanced character of Lockhart’s business and industrial operation to men of the business and management class who either sought to invest in or find employment with the Jackson Lumber Company. The journal reported the Lockhart operation produced “great quantities of comb-grained yellow pine flooring for shipment to fastidious New England. This product pleases the easterners so thoroughly well that they have not yet been able to get enough of it.” The language of consumption expressed the forest industry’s interest in portraying itself as adding economic fuel to a growing bull market, while cloaking the harsher reality of the labor involved in harvesting timber. For

¹³¹ "Model Sawmill Plants, XXIII." *American Lumberman* Vol. 60 (November, 1900) 28-29.

technology and consumer demand alone do not turn forests into the products of fashionable domestic spaces.¹³²

The industry media's emphasis on capacity and production employed deceptively systematic and sanitized language that promoted notions of progress for the south contrasted with the truly barbaric conditions of forest industry labor. The isolation and danger of forest industry labor made it unattractive to men with families or those who had any alternative means of earning money. Forest industry required the difficult work of railroad construction. Southern railroad expansion in the 1870s increased demand for axmen to cut railroad ties as each mile of track required 3,000 ties and an additional 200 replacement ties per mile each year. At the time most forest labor consisted of local part-time farmers who engaged in seasonal work on the railroads. Southern farmers sought to avoid long term work cutting trees and laying track primarily due to the brutal character of the labor. Some locals participated in timbering and eventually took work in sawmill camps to supplement their meager farming income. But most local white farmers would not do such difficult work on a permanent basis.¹³³

The difficulty of felling enormous trees and moving the heavy fresh timber made forest industrial labor exceedingly dangerous. Woodsman reported that: "even the most expert crews were not always certain of the direction a tree would fall." When trees crashed to the ground, limbs broke off and hurtled through the air in random and unpredictable directions. Mark King, a woodsman working in the early 1900s, recalled that "On one occasion, a limb about the thickness of a mans arm hit the head of one of

¹³² Ibid; Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 27-30; 128-131; 152-153; Cronon emphasized the transformation of *primary* nature into *secondary nature* as humans harvested and planed timber into usable saleable lumber for transport from rural forests to domestic urban spaces.

¹³³ Jones, *Dispossessed*: (1992) 56; Massey, *A History of the Lumber Industry*, (1960) 57-60; Will Jones, *The Tribe of Black Ulysses: African American Lumber Workers in the Jim Crow South*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004) 61-66; 76-86; 106-111.

the cutters so hard that it killed him instantly and left a depression in his skull several inches deep.” The horrendous character of forest industry labor, and locals’ preference for avoiding long-term employment under those conditions, represented a perennial challenge to lumbermen.¹³⁴

The shortage of available labor led lumbermen to seek alternative labor sources for their industrial timbering operations. By the 1890s, rural industry overcame labor shortages by recruiting and contracting immigrant laborers. This system of “foreign contract labor” included tapping into foreign immigrant labor pools with the help of labor agents, known as *Padrones*, in northern and eastern cities who targeted foreign immigrants for positions working in the southern forests. By 1906, the Jackson Lumber Company employed labor agents, Sigmund S. Schwartz, Smith & Company, and Frank & Miller Company, to recruit immigrant workers for southern forest industry jobs. The Jackson Company offered labor agents cash fees of \$3.00 for each man they sent south. Like those who found themselves ensnared by Frank Sabia, foreign immigrant workers knew little of the dangers of the forest industry, and their marginal social status made them susceptible to manipulative labor agents involved in peonage labor networks. The Jackson Lumber Co. relied heavily on foreign contract labor and concealed its abusive labor practices in the dense forests outside the reach of federal regulation.¹³⁵

Social justice progressive reformers such as Mary Grace Quackenbos discovered immigrant families who reported their loved ones who left for southern jobs and had lost contact or disappeared. Quackenbos, the granddaughter of wealthy abolitionists,

¹³⁴ Massey, *A History of the Lumber Industry* (1960) 50, 61.

¹³⁵ Ibid; DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1; Pete Daniel, *Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972); Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery By Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*, (New York: Doubleday Press, 2008).

established herself as an attorney and set out as a pioneering investigator and prosecutor of labor abuses involving immigrants in Manhattan's lower east side. In 1905 she founded the "People's Law Firm" to further the work of New York's Legal Aid Society among workers and the poor. Through mostly immigrant women who reported their sons and husbands missing, Quackenbos discovered a slew of peonage labor camps in Florida, Alabama, Tennessee, and Mississippi. After approaching the Department of Justice with her findings, the Assistant Attorney General, Charles Wells Russell, hired Quackenbos to join the DOJ as a Special Assistant U.S. Attorney, the first woman ever to do so.¹³⁶

By 1906 Federal investigators began investigating peonage labor abuses in southern rural industrial labor camps in an attempt to prosecute both labor agents who misrepresented wages and provisions, and corporate management who subjected workers to debt peonage and physical violence inside the forests. Simultaneously muckraker journalists began to condemn the lumber industry for its wasteful practices, exploitation of workers, and rampant laissez-faire capitalism. Alexander Irvine, a writer for *Appleton's Magazine*, who worked undercover in 1906 to expose abuse at the Jackson Lumber Company, wrote that Lockhart is "a town where men were parts of machine—a machine to grind out profits for men who never saw the place, who never sensed its dull brutal life."¹³⁷

Like those who sought jobs in the Florida Keys, workers suffering from high unemployment and difficult labor conditions in northern urban cities sought opportunity in southern forest industry jobs. Men reported leaving industrial labor in

¹³⁶ Randolph H. Boehm, "Mary Grace Quackenbos and the Federal Campaign against Peonage: The Case of Sunnyside Plantation," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Spring, 1991) 40-59.

¹³⁷ Massey, *A History of the Lumber Industry*, (1960) 67-71; Daniel, *Shadow of Slavery* (1972); Alexander Irvine, "My Life In Peonage," *Appleton's Magazine*, Vol. 9 June, (1907).

New York that required long hours in uncomfortable physical conditions. George Flemming, an American, worked at the Crown Extract Co. in New York stated: “I left because I couldn’t stand the heat of the boilers.” Workers seeking employment accepted labor agents’ promise of “good jobs” in the South, assuming that better opportunities awaited them in the southern forests. Felix Pouleski worked for the American Sugar Refining Co. in New York and claimed he responded to Schwartz’ ad in the paper because “I wanted to go to [the] country.” Joseph Lyons accepted a job in Georgia because “I thought I could save money and make a man out of myself.” Initially, workers struggling against high unemployment and difficult labor conditions in northern cities envisioned the rural landscapes of the southern forests as spaces of comfort and self-improvement.¹³⁸

Whether working for Sabia, Schwartz, or Smith and Co., labor agents consistently used idealized descriptions of the southern workspaces to embolden workers to sign up for jobs in southern forests. Recruiters lured workers with stories of easy labor in comfortable climates, often recruiting men who did not want to work in the poor conditions of urban industrial jobs. Patrick Creaven, a worker from New York, met a man who told him that he had heard of jobs offered by one S. Schwartz at First Street who promised good work at \$1.50 per day. According to Creaven, Schwartz “told us good stories about work in the South.” Schwartz’s recruiter lured workers by describing the South as “nice country and easy work.” He told the men of a pencil factory in Georgia where they would work. Max Cantor signed up with Schwartz on July 4, 1906, and reported that he went south with 34 other men. Another New York

¹³⁸ George Flemming, Felix Pouleski Affidavits, DOJ Files NA, RG 60, (Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1).

recruiter, the Frank & Miller agency, promised workers skilled labor positions. Frank and Miller promised Rudolph Lanniger a “good job” and they hired Manuel Jordomons, a Bulgarian mason, to do skilled work in Georgia.¹³⁹

In sworn affidavits taken in 1906 workers directly linked the labor agents in New York to the Jackson Lumber Company. Jacob Ormanskey testified that Smith and Company was “An agent of the saw mill company... at Lockhart, Alabama.” Ormanskey reported the company “brought us by steamer from New York to Savannah, where another agent of the company, a negro, met us and took us by train to Milner, Alabama. From there this negro, who was a foreman for Smith & Company, took us by wagon to Lockhart, about twenty miles from Milner.” Frank & Miller shipped Rudolph Lanniger south to Savannah via steamship, then by rail to Lockhart in July 1906. Ormanskey and other workers reported that the foremen who escorted them from Savannah to Lockhart, many of whom were black, carried rifles, coerced workers, and deterred escape attempts.¹⁴⁰

Once inside the Jackson Company forests workers found themselves trapped inside isolated railroad construction and timbering sites subject to horrendous labor regimes. Though labor agents portrayed southern forests as serene and idyllic, the actual physical conditions in the forest industry labor camps were extremely harsh. The combination of intense heat, lack of amenities, and heavy timber made working in the forests a harrowing job. Average temperatures for July-August in the Alabama forest reached over ninety degrees Fahrenheit and humidity levels consistently topped ninety percent. Workers consistently referred to working in what they called “the burning

¹³⁹ *New York Times*, October 21, (1906); Daniel, *Shadow of Slavery*, (1972); Alexander Irvine, “My Life In Peonage,” (1907); Patrick Craven Affidavit in DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

¹⁴⁰ Ormanskey and Lanniger Affidavits in DOJ Files NA, RG 60 Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

sun.” Direct, prolonged sun exposure caused serious physical injury to workers unaccustomed to and unprotected from such powerful heat. Alexander Irvine noted that after working in the hot sun for several days, Herman Ormanskey gained the sympathy of even some bosses because “the skin had peeled off his arms.”¹⁴¹

In addition to the heat, workers immediately noted the isolation of the camps as a threat to their safety. The forest lumber camps lay miles away from the town of Lockhart. Workers characterized the landscape of the forest labor camps as isolated and having poor visibility. They recognized their increased vulnerability when working in the forests far away from towns, transportation, or government, and they expressed their sense of danger in their descriptions of the forest labor camps. Louis Krieger specifically noted the lack of transportation or infrastructure in the forest labor camps when he explained how he was taken to “the woods where there was no train station.” Mike Trudics explained that as the foremen took him to the pine drift seven miles into the forest “a sort of dread seized me...I was filled with suspicion.” What workers called “Gallagher’s camp” lay eight miles from the sawmill at Lockhart, and Irvine wrote that “A thick gray mist lay low in the valley in the early part of morning.”¹⁴²

The men who entered the southern forest labor camps viewed them as a wilderness and they expressed their concern in stark terms. Workers’ described the Jackson Company forests as “hell.” Their isolation, heat, humidity along with the armed labor bosses rendered them powerless in the face of terrible odds. Mike Trudics explained to Alexander Irvine: “So here we were, out in a wild place, helpless and at the mercy of men who laughed at contracts and out of whose hip pockets bulged revolvers.”

¹⁴¹ See NOAA; <http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/temp-and-precip/time-series/index>; Irvine, “My Life In Peonage,” (1907).

¹⁴² Trudics “Life Story of a Hungarian Peon,” in Holt Hamilton, ed., *The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans as Told by Themselves* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 197-207.

In the forest workers opportunities seemed to disappear, replaced only by the miserable climate, terrifying landscapes, and violent labor regimes. Bosses tortured them, bound and punished them when they resisted. The isolated woods impeded their ability to obtain help from family and friends. Foremen forced Harry Korsinsky at gunpoint to do what he called “pick and shovel” work in the extreme heat, neither of which he was accustomed to. After only a few hours of such horrendous labor, most men felt they might not survive the Jackson Company’s forests.¹⁴³

Workers confronted not only terrible environmental conditions inside the Jackson Company forests, but also barbaric labor regimes enforced by foremen or “woods bosses.” Louis Kriger landed at Brunswick Georgia where black guards, armed with shotguns and pistols, escorted him into the woods. He saw three or four Irishmen run from the forest labor camp, and the boss chased them down, whipped them, and brought them back with “their hands tied behind their backs.” The sight of men, hands bound and coerced at gunpoint, convinced newly arriving workers they had entered a dangerous environment even before they met the violence themselves. Joseph Neil also worked at Brunswick, Georgia; he saw a foreman strike a boy named Joe in the face with a shovel. “I saw his mouth bleeding. He had gone to the woods and the boss went after him.” Workers learned quickly that violence characterized Jackson’s forest industry labor camps.¹⁴⁴

The informal title “woods boss” intimated what workers expressed—that inside the forest labor camps, human foremen became part of the harsh physical environments enforcing a vicious law of predator and prey. Workers described foremen’s brutality as

¹⁴³ Hamilton, *Life Stories*, (2000) 197-207.

¹⁴⁴ Harry Korshinsky, Joseph Neil, Louis Kriger Affidavitsin DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

an additional hardship that made forest industry labor unbearable. The expose journalist and Jackson Company laborer, Alexander Irvine, depicted the foremen as “ignorant, illiterate men” who “only know the law of the jungle.” To workers, bosses represented the primary threat to their health and freedom. In describing the appearance and behavior of S.E. Huggins, a boss at Lockhart, Irvine portrayed him as embodying the harsh forest landscape. Irvine stated: “Huggins is a typical frontiersman. He was probably born among the pines and inherited the knots. His face has the appearance of a turpentine tree newly chipped. It bears the marks of the shack.” Irvine described Huggins as tall, heavy built: “He shambles—usually with a cloud on his face and a chip on his shoulder. He understands the wild. He belongs there, and men who cannot easily adjust themselves to the life find little mercy or consideration at his hands.”¹⁴⁵

Robert Gallagher, another of the foremen in the Jackson Company camps, called by workers “the bull of the woods,” routinely used debt peonage and physical brutality to extract labor from workers and timber from the forest. Irvine described Gallagher as an Irishman being only “a generation or two removed from the sod.” He had a talent for profanity, and was a “genius” as a labor driver. Gallagher used transportation charges as leverage to keep workers in the camps and regularly abused his workers when they defied his orders. He tied Manuel Jordomons, Harry Lyman, and John Cox to trees and pistol-whipped them for faltering under the arduous labor of cutting trees for railroad ties. Workers reported he regularly fired his pistol within inches of their face, neck, and chest to terrify them. The men in the Jackson camp said that Gallagher took a certain

¹⁴⁵ Irvine, “My Life In Peonage,” (1907).

sadistic pleasure in abusing one young man especially. Gallagher reportedly beat the endearingly nicknamed Herman ‘Square-head’ Orminsky “on a daily basis.”¹⁴⁶

Food became a crucial factor in workers’ experience inside forest labor camps. Many went without food on their long journey to the South and they hoped to find sustenance once they arrived at the job site. Upon entering the camps workers immediately noticed the lack of provisions, citing them as one major reason the forests were not fit for working men. George Flemming described the food as “awful.” Camp cooks served workers moldy bread and “tripe” meat. At one meal, bosses gave Max Canter and men in his camp 20 biscuits for 38 men: “not enough to go around,” they told investigators. The fare was certainly not sufficient caloric intake for men carrying out such extreme labor. Patrick Craven reported: “The fare was not fit for a workingman.” The shortage of adequate food and shelter made the already difficult physical environment even more of a burden as the camps offered little respite for workers.¹⁴⁷

A lack of permanent structures revealed the inherently temporary nature of forest industry labor spaces. As camps moved deeper into the woods, the men lived further from permanent housing or stores. They described the poor sleeping conditions as a significant hardship and linked inadequate housing to their inhumane treatment. Bennie Garubert, sent to a railroad camp in Georgia, found no quarters: “We had no place to sleep at all, no houses, no cars...we slept in the woods.” Harry Korshinsky found no place “fit to sleep in after twelve hours of work each day.” Jackson’s labor agents transported Max Cantor and a party of thirty-four men deep into a forest, two

¹⁴⁶ Ibid; DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

¹⁴⁷ George Fleming, Max Cantor, Patrick Craven Affidavits in DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

miles from the town of Fitzgerald, Georgia. Cantor reported there was “no place to sleep, a few broken up houses with floors all broken up, no beds, no mattresses, or even straw.” Some men reported being provided tents to sleep in. Men were put in 8’x12’ tents, eight men to a tent. Some men slept on what they called “sodden bedding,” literally using the forest debris to cushion them from the hard ground. Though the records indicate that the company bosses left many workers exposed to the elements, the company provided some men minimal shelter in the Jackson lumber camps.¹⁴⁸

The forest industry camps’ only real buildings were cramped train cars used to house crowds of men. The isolation and tight quarters of the boxcars stood in stark contrast to the image of expansive southern forests. At the Lockhart camp, box cars fitted with “rude bunks” called “shaking jacks,” accommodated between twenty and forty-eight men. Irvine described the “small [12’x 9’] space in center which serves as a lavatory...barbershop and sitting room...[with] a wash basin that 11 men share.” These small crowded spaces contributed to the spread of disease. Irvine wrote simply: “In the box car, chaos, junk, effluvia!” Poor living conditions represented more than a mere discomfort for workers; they served as a principal site for the spread of typhoid, posing a significant risk to workers’ health, and causing the death of at least two men in the summer of 1906.¹⁴⁹

The distant forest labor camps rarely had sanitary water supplies. Irvine noted that one mile from the Lockhart camp lay a “shallow ditch” that held the only available water supply for the camp. The men dug two wells, both of which produced “almost no water.” Workers used what little time off they had to bathe and launder their clothes.

¹⁴⁸ Bennie Graubert, Harry Korshinsky, Max Cantor, Rudolph Lanniger, Jacob Ormansky Affidavits in DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

¹⁴⁹ Massey, *A History of the Lumber Industry* (1960); Irvine, “My Life In Peonage,” (1907.)

Yet even during their free time, workers' reports reveal the unhealthy conditions they lived and labored in. On a Sunday, Irvine attended what he called a "washing party" at a small trench roughly twelve inches deep, worming its way sluggishly through the woods, where the men attempted to wash clothes but mostly got drunk on whiskey and sang songs. The lack of sufficient food and sanitary water led to the spread of disease, causing great suffering in the camp.¹⁵⁰

The Jackson Company employed a physician named Dr. Trammel who attended to some of the men. The company charged each man \$1.10 per month for insurance and medical care, offsetting their pay, and forcing them further into debt. The company used this debt as leverage to keep workers against their will. Trammel said many men in the camp were treated for typhoid and other intestinal diseases. He explained: "Typhoid fever is caused by a germ...but its origin is difficult to trace." Irvine wrote that such diseases obviously came from the "foul, stagnant, swamp, which is the only water supply. I saw with my own eyes the excrement of both men and beasts dissolving in the ditch from which we got our drinking water." Workers sometimes filtered or boiled the water before drinking it, but in the summer of 1906, twenty-six men fell ill with fever and two died. One man, Joe Hooley, lay dying in the boxcar for several days.¹⁵¹

Though the sawmill at Lockhart was a rather technologically sophisticated operation for its time, labor in the forest camps was dull, crude, backbreaking work, worsened by the brutality of the woods bosses. The cutting, hauling, and loading of trees to the mill required men and horses to confront the dangers of heavy, freshly cut timber, flying splintered branches, and buzzing saws. Men and horses worked within

¹⁵⁰ Irvine, "My Life in peonage," (1907).

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

“teams” in particular positions. The work of timbering required ‘sawyers’ who cut down pines, ‘swampers’ who trimmed the trees, and ‘skidders’ who used horses to pull or “snake” trees into position. The ‘chainer’ bound logs on the ‘cross-hauler’ with a team of both men and oxen or horses that loaded them onto rail cars for transportation to the saw mill. The process required extreme physical exertion, concentration and quick reflexes. Small mistakes caused serious injury.¹⁵²

The work lasted from six a.m. until dark. Foremen punished men who could not perform to their expectations. Jacob Ormansky reported being marched to work in the morning and put to “cutting trees.” Black armed guards watched over each squad of workers. “When we were not able to do the work the negro whipped us. He whipped me several times on my head, eyes, and back until I bled.” Bosses forced Edward J. Stone, or “Stoney” as his fellow workers called him, to carry 200 lb. railroad ties at gunpoint. Much of the work in the camps required men to perform tasks beyond their physical abilities. An unnamed man reportedly suffered physical injuries carrying ties, the heavy, coarse timber tore the skin from his shoulders exposing the flesh and bone beneath. The difficulty of the work regime led to worker resistance inside the Jackson Company forests.¹⁵³

Both lumber industry leaders and journalist Alexander Irvine noted worker’s unpreparedness for the arduous labor required in timbering operations and the violence foremen used to coerce labor out of the men. Irvine wrote: “A man who sells shoelaces on the bowery is not easily transformed into a lumber jack. Attempts to affect such a transformation brought into play the cowhide and the bloodhound.” But workers took

¹⁵² Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery* (1972) 84; Irvine, “My Life In Peonage,” (1907.)

¹⁵³ Jacob Ormansky, Mike Trudics Affidavits in DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

any opportunity to escape from the camps, fleeing into the forests in hope of making it to a nearby town or train station. One worker, Mike Trudics, testified: “Hardly a day passed...without some one being run down by the bosses or the bloodhounds and returned and whipped.” Thus not unlike the county farms and state penitentiaries across the South that utilized the convict lease system, the Jackson Lumber Company used coercive labor regimes to maintain labor in the forest industry labor camps.¹⁵⁴

Gallagher and other foremen experienced great difficulty in monitoring and retaining labor in the dense forests. Bosses often had to chase down, capture, and return men to work in the camps. This violent pattern of escape, capture, punishment and return came to characterize relations between workers and foremen in the Jackson Company forests. Jacob Ormansky reported that over each team was a “negro guard...with a pistol and a strap.” One John Dubrin tried to get away and they caught him and locked him in “a dark cellar” in the ground for three days, literally using the land to retain and punish him. Ormansky reported seeing several men tied to trees and whipped for trying to get away. Michael Trudic, arrived in Lockhart on July 18th, and attempted to escape on the very next day. He “hid in the woods” but Gallagher eventually caught and “horse-whipped” him. Trudics explained: “In the woods they can do anything they want to and no one can see them but God.”¹⁵⁵

The men continually resisted Gallagher’s brutality, forcing him to contend with their repeated defiance and attempted escapes from the camps. Workers often utilized the visual cover provided by the dense forest to resist the labor demands of bosses.

Gallagher employed men, horses, and bloodhounds along with the isolation of the

¹⁵⁴ Ibid; Irvine, “My Life In Peonage,” (1907); David J. Bodenhamer and James W. Ely, Jr. eds., *Ambivalent Legacy: A Legal History of the South*, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1984) 70-100.

¹⁵⁵ Jacob Ormansky, Mike Trudics Affidavits in DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

environment to contain and coerce workers. Camp foremen caught Arthur Buckley, a boy under the age of twenty, resting in the forest and had him flogged thirty times. Max Cantor testified Gallagher used “negroes on handcars” and dogs to catch four “Jews” who escaped into the woods. A worker only fifteen years of age escaped into the woods and the bosses captured him and beat him severely. Gallagher did not always catch escaped workers. Louis Kriger ran away into the forest with seven other boys, and immediately after leaving they came across another group who joined them. Emerging from the forest they came upon a bridge where they saw the foreman and a policeman standing, so they escaped the opposite direction into the woods. The woods functioned as difficult spaces in which to monitor and control workers, and provided a significant obstacle to bosses’ attempts to retain labor.¹⁵⁶

The forests were also fluid spaces where men consistently found opportunities to defy bosses. The forest provided cover under which some men absconded from the camps. Foremen struggled against the limited visibility in the pine drifts as they searched the mazes of trees for escaped workers. Max Cantor escaped to the woods with a group of men, and, avoiding the road, found a section of peach trees. They ate peaches off the ground until they reached a distant town. Jacob Ormanskey reported “while one of the guards was asleep I sneaked off and struck a freight train and came to Atlanta.” Charles Maskowitz, alias Bennie Garubert, worked only three days before the lack of sleeping quarters, poor food, and horrendous labor drove him to escape. On July 8, 1906, after hearing “some Irish men had run away before we came...about twelve of us ran away too.” Garubert and the others used the forest to hide and managed to elude foremen and their bloodhounds. “On the bridge we saw two carriages with sheriffs and

¹⁵⁶ Max Cantor, Louis Kriger Affidavits in DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

bloodhounds. There were nine of us and we laid flat in the grass...for two hours.”

Eventually the men escaped through the swamps.¹⁵⁷

Workers who could not physically escape dealt with the hardships of their condition through the main temporary relief available inside the camps: whiskey. Drinking dulled the pain of sore muscles and torn skin as well as the anxiety of living under such violent coercion. The company provided liquor to the men for a price and workers' drinking debts contributed to the system of peonage. Irvine noted upon entering the camps that the foremen sent him to replace the team driver who was “on a drunk.” Irvine wrote that: “All the negroes and most of the whites borrow money every Saturday night,” and some men walked through the woods to company saloons in Lockhart or Florala. Bob Anderson, a “colored...teamster...gets drunk twice a month, often is locked up in jail, and Gallagher pays his fine,” Irvine wrote. Florala was a “license town” where the men exchanged their hard earned money for “liquor and lewdness.” On his return from the bars to camp one night, Irvine got lost in the darkness of the forest. When he finally made it back to the camp, inside the boxcar he found that several men were in a state he described as “helplessly drunk.” Irvine wrote that the sleeping car “had the tang and odor of a stable.” Irvine underscored the intemperance of the forest labor camps, showing how alcohol functioned as a health risk, a symptom of social disorder, and a device the company used to indebt workers.¹⁵⁸

In describing the forest labor camps workers and federal investigators argued the forest industry camps reduced workers to chattel. Workers viewed the camps as places unfit for men where the company housed them in corals, fed them poor food, tied

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, Bennie Graubert Affidavit DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

¹⁵⁸ Irvine, “My Life In Peonage,” (1907).

them to trees, and lashed them with horsewhips. John Gindes, testified that “the work at the camp was very hard and we were treated like cattle.” Jacob Ormansky asserted: “The workmen were not treated like men, but like dogs.” But workers also lived with animals in the camps. Both dogs and livestock performed crucial roles in industrial forest labor and men worked along side animals, named them, and mourned their deaths. These fluid social and environmental relationships underscored how the forest labor camps operated as dynamic spaces where industrial exploitation and company bosses reduced men to chattel, and yet where men often identified with, and even empathized with, their fellow animal laborers.¹⁵⁹

Animals suffered the difficult labor and injuries associated with forest industry labor just as the men did. Camp bosses and employees used bloodhounds and other dogs for both security and companionship in the Lockhart camp. Bloodhounds as a breed had a long history in the South tracking escaped slaves, convict laborers, and peons. In the southern forests, hound dogs suffered similarly to workers and endured both the heat and dangerous labor. *The Florala News*, giving voice to the public concern regarding an influx of foreigners and vagabond workers into the area, reported: “The Company keeps trained dogs to run down such fellows as jump contracts and violate the laws.” The presence of dogs as security for the camp reassured locals. Southerners felt confident in dogs’ ability to track down and help bosses capture escaped workers whom the local community feared as both foreigners and vagrants. Dogs thus occupied a multiplicity of positions as trusted allies of bosses, a security force for locals, companions to workers, and camp laborers themselves.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ John Gindes, Jacob Ormansky Affidavit in DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

¹⁶⁰ Irvine, “My Life In Peonage,” (1907).

Gallagher kept a kennel of bloodhounds that he used to catch escaped workers. Black guards handled the dogs skillfully and worked and communicated with dogs to track escaped workers. Gallagher also used black workers to test the dogs. He ordered one unsuspecting black man into the woods on an errand, and then sent the hounds after him. Mrs. Bellinger, the wife of foreman Archie Bellinger, noted the dogs' proficiency stating: "They treed the nigger alright." Men also kept dogs for companions in the camp. Irvine noted that the cook, Hughie, had a "slew of pups" for pets. Dogs also suffered the difficult physical environment and excessive labor of the camps. Bloodhounds have thick coats and struggle in hot weather, easily overheating or even dying while in pursuit of escaped workers. Bloodhounds characteristically suffered from eye and skin infections if not properly cared for, and occasionally incurred injuries from heavy equipment. Irvine noted that one "ol' pup," named Nellie, was "cut in twain" by a logging train car in the camp. Workers publicly mourned Nellie's death, revealing the emotional attachment men felt for their animal companions acknowledging the awkward similitude men and animals occupied in the forest.¹⁶¹

The Jackson lumber operation drastically altered the forest landscapes from mixed-use spaces for locals and their animals to a clear-cut wasteland. As forests used for grazing turned into spaces for timbering almost overnight, newly built, fast moving log trains killed or injured cattle that roamed the forests and occasionally wandered onto the tracks. Horses pulled logs from the pine drifts to the train cars day after day in the heat and humidity, and suffered mortal injuries as a result. Thus animals served dual roles inside the forest labor camps as both extensions of the camp bosses and workers

¹⁶¹ C.F. Brey and L.F. Reed, *The Complete Bloodhound*, (Wiley, UK: Howell Book House, 1978); William D. Tolhurst, *Manhunters: Hounds of the Big T*, (Louisville, KY: Hound Dog Press, 1984); Irvine, "My Life In Peonage," (1907.)

who suffered alongside men. Irvine had a unique opportunity to see the dual role of animals as workers and companions in the camps, and he made a conscious choice to write about animals in order to express both the brutality and camaraderie workers experienced. Irvine wrote of a “tall, powerful, steel-grey four year old horse named Steel” and an older horse named “Larry” who worked in the camp. He described a man named Ollie, “the biggest man in the camp,” who cared for Larry and Steel. “Steel seemed to understand Larry and Ollie understood them both...[he] treated them kindly and they haul more lumber than any other team in camp.” Irvine’s story of these majestic horses did not end with his description of their mutual affection for Ollie, or their success as a team. Irvine told Larry’s story as an allegory to appeal to readers’ sympathy toward animals and to portray both the inhumanity of the bosses and the resilience of men and chattel who driven beyond their abilities, nevertheless continued to work together.¹⁶²

Irvine wrote that Larry was a “very powerful horse...but for some years he has been mentally unbalanced.” Larry came from Michigan and reportedly worked under “many drivers of many nations” who “treated him with varying degrees of consideration.” On a bet, one teamster argued that he could set a record for logs pulled in a day—and using Larry to carry out the task, he left the creature “stupid.” The “horse doctors said his mind was blank,” Irvine wrote. “He was so stupid that they could not work him.” Frustrated with Larry’s incompetence, Gallagher’s assistant led the horse into the woods—not unlike the men—and beat him over the head and left him bleeding for dead. However, Larry eventually regained consciousness and somehow returned to camp. Irvine’s story about Larry anthropomorphized the horse by portraying him as a

¹⁶² Alexander Irvine, “My Life In Peonage,” (1907).

laborer who experienced exactly what many men faced in the camps. Irvine's allegory revealed the men's identification with the animals they worked alongside, an experience many workers felt keenly in the camps, along with their dread of human violence and their hope to survive that cruelty themselves.¹⁶³

The diversity of worker's ethnic and national background, combined with southern foremen, and local black labor, made the camps dynamic sites of racial and ethnic relations. Labor agents targeted immigrant workers for labor in the South not only because of their ignorance of the actual conditions there, but also because their immigrant status reduced their ability to find alternate employment or to legally challenge poor treatment. Newly arrived southern and eastern European immigrants found fewer employment options in the vast labor pools of the urban North and thus sought opportunity in southern forest industry jobs. Workers often traveled to, worked in, and ran off from the camps in ethnically homogenous groups, and their reports reveal their hyper-awareness of ethnic difference inside the camps. Foremen's violence gave expression to Gilded Age class hierarchies and racial ideologies of white supremacy, which held that immigrants and blacks occupied inferior social categories.¹⁶⁴

Signifying the Victorian obsession with ethnic difference, nearly all the Department of Justice affidavits begin by designating the ethnic or national origins of

¹⁶³ Massey, *A History of the Lumber Industry* (1960); Irvine, "My Life In Peonage," (1907.)

¹⁶⁴ Ibid; For literature on Immigrants and Race in the U.S., see also: John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955); Barbara Miller Solomon's *Ancestors and Immigrants: A Changing New England Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956); Donna Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984); Ewa Morawska, *For Bread with Butter: The Life-Worlds of East Central European Immigrants in Johnstown, Pennsylvania 1890-1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); also; *Barbarian Virtues; The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000).

the witness testifying. Eugene P. Newlander, “a Hungarian,” worked for the Jackson Lumber Company as a labor agent. John Filzalovski, a fifteen year old “Slavish boy” testified to his labor in Fulton County Georgia in August of 1906, and Jacob Ormansky reported: “I left New York five weeks ago in company with about sixty men, fifteen of whom were Russian Jews, like myself.” Investigators noted Louis Kriger was “a recent immigrant from Wilkomir, Russia.” Kriger stated that “three or four Irishman” ran away from the camp upon his arrival, revealing that in the camps where men did not know one another, physical appearances and language differences often served as key indicators of their identity.¹⁶⁵

Workers included the varying ethnicities among the camps’ many disconcerting qualities. Though they all shared a similar condition as peonage laborers, they expressed distaste for one another. A young Irish boy named McGuinnis refused to sleep in a train car with Greek workers, and for this transgression Gallagher, also of Irish descent, apparently pistol-whipped him into submission. Irvine described the camps as both ethnically mixed and segregated, attributing the separations to both worker choice and southern custom. He noted that southern workers called the foreigners “dagos” and “sheenies.” Men called one camp “the dago camp” for its large Italian element. Irvine described his team as “a strange mixture—a Dane, a Virginia ‘cracker,’ a Michigan lumber jack, two Negroes, and an Irish man.” He pointed out the distinction between the “White car” and the “Negroe sleeping car.” He described the town of Lockhart as being “divided racially by a grove of pine trees” and having both

¹⁶⁵ Newlander, Fizalovski, Ormansky, Kriger Affidavits in DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

white and black schools and churches. Even within ethnic groups, violence existed based upon the hierarchies of status that the forest industry camps relied upon.¹⁶⁶

Though the term ‘boss’ links the social hierarchy of the peonage labor camps to the southern legacy of slavery, African-American workers occupied positions both as peons and as guards within the camps, representing the often incongruous racial relationships that characterized peonage labor regimes. The forced integration of men in the forests and the use of black men as guards contradicted the distinctly segregated character of most New South workspaces. The forest industry labor camps offered opportunities for black laborers that local whites preferred not to fill. This allowed blacks to obtain positions of authority within the camps. Bosses often employed African-American men to guard and hunt down escaped immigrant workers. The presence of armed black guards made the camps particularly unfamiliar and frightening to immigrant workers.¹⁶⁷

The southern custom of *de jure* racial segregation drew Irvine’s attention almost immediately upon his entering the camp. But once in the pine drifts, nearly eight miles from the company town, he met and worked alongside African Americans such as Bob Anderson, a black teamster. Though workers of varying ethnicities lived and labored alongside one another and some black guards assumed positions of power over white workers, the woods bosses acted out commonly recognized patterns of racial violence in the camps. Irvine reported Gallagher caught two black workers fighting and egged them on. He gave them metal pipes and coerced them at gunpoint to fight on. Gallagher extended his brutality toward all laborers regardless of race, but in this case he

¹⁶⁶ DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1; Irvine, “My Life In Peonage,” (1907).

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

instigated a particularly violent form of 'entertainment' that revealed both the common southern racial ideology of black inferiority and his personal sadistic temperament.¹⁶⁸

Like the European immigrant workers, Irvine described the camps in terms of commonly held white racial ideologies that associated blacks with both vice and social disorder. Irvine wrote: "The Negroe car held fifty men, ½ dozen playing cards" and a "group of singers around a banjo." Irvine linked their gambling to their singing noting "The financial losses of the singers added color to the words of the song." Blues music dealt with hard labor and lack of opportunity experienced by southern working class folks. Yet in his attempts to express sympathy for black workers, Irvine reinforced racial ideologies of blacks as especially emotive. Even as Irvine attempted to expose black workers' exploitation and whites' sense of racial superiority, he expressed the awkward discrimination perhaps acceptable to his Progressive northern white audience, which identified blacks as victimized laborers and symbols of social disorder. He offered a critique of white workers who talked of "nigger's inferiority" explaining "...but Negroes did the best work in camp." Yet Irvine identified black workers as unsophisticated and crude, indicating that the particularly "smutty stories" white workers told "would make [even] a Negro blush." Black workers' role in the camps underscored their unique position in the modern south: they were crucial to rural industries new labor regimes, but many whites viewed of them as dangerous threats to the social order.¹⁶⁹

Mary Grace Quackenbos and Alexander Irvine viewed the southern forests as violent spaces, where innocent workers met the abuses of the forest industrial labor

¹⁶⁸ Irvine, "My Life In Peonage," (1907.); DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid; Robin D.G. Kelley, "*We Are Not What We Seem*": Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South, *The Journal Of American History*, Vol. 80, No. 1 (June, 1993) 75-112; See Also James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

system. Exposing the abuses of the company and proving that foremen held workers against their will required reformers to physically visit the camps themselves. In the summer of 1906, male investigators ventured into the southern forests disguised as workers in order to interview the men. Quackenbos prosecuted the foremen in court, clashing with the local lumber industry in an intellectual contest that reached the highest levels of the U.S. government, including Presidents Roosevelt and Taft. The investigations and trials place the southern forest industry squarely within the national Progressive movement for workers rights.¹⁷⁰

The earliest federal investigators to visit the southern work camps in northern Florida faced swarms of mosquitoes, traversed swamps up to their chests, and found the forests were “infested with wild animals of all kinds, snakes, alligators, and other reptiles.” Investigators asserted that the physical environment of the southern forest industry labor camps contained significant dangers to workers’ health and provided obstacles preventing their escape. They wrote that the men “are through the natural circumstances and conditions held in abject slavery.” They rejected foremen’s claims that they carried shotguns to defend against the “wild panthers,” rather than to coerce the laborers. Quackenbos wrote that the “cruelties practiced” in the camps in Florida and Alabama were “not easy to get at...unless detectives could spend many weeks in those camps and subject themselves to the dangers.”¹⁷¹

Quackenbos and federal agents noted the difficulty of exposing peonage in the South, both because of the remoteness of the camps and the hazardous environment, but also the seeming conspiracy between business and law enforcement. Several workers

¹⁷⁰ Ibid; See also: Michael E. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: the Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003); Robert H. Weibe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

¹⁷¹ DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

who complained disappeared before they could testify in court. In reference to the earlier Clyatt case of 1902, where bosses were convicted for capturing escaped black workers and returning them to labor in the Florida forest industry camps, Alexander Irvine wrote that federal officials reported “The two Negroes [witnesses] disappeared suddenly and forever! They vanished as if the earth had opened and swallowed them.” Workers reported that C.H. Monecke, deputy Marshall in Florida, worked for the Jackson Lumber Company to arrest men who escaped and return them to camp. Florida Justice of the Peace, James Johnson, testified that Gallagher used his court as an “auxiliary” to the Lockhart labor regime. The mutual agreement between southern lumbermen and local law enforcement served as one of the principal factors in the broader system of coercive labor regimes.¹⁷²

Will Nanse, an undercover investigator for the Department of Justice, ventured into the Jackson camps in July 1906. He wrote to Quackenbos that he “hired on” as a worker so that he could talk with the men without drawing the attention of the foremen. Nanse witnessed the cycle of escape and capture so central to peonage work camps when he reportedly saw “an old man...aged 35 run away at night...Gallagher caught him 8 miles from the camp in the woods” and brought him back. Nanse interviewed Edward J. “Stonie” Stone, who reported that the foreman, Archie Bellinger, took Arthur Buckley, an 18 year-old “American,” and whipped him for fighting with another worker named William Hoffman. Federal investigators’ correspondence and affidavits provided legal power to workers’ harrowing tales. But translating the harsh reality of workers’ experiences into legal proof of wrongdoing on the part of the Jackson Lumber Company remained obscured by the rural isolation of the camps and the

¹⁷² Irvine, “My Life In Peonage,” (1907.); Daniel, *Shadow of Slavery*, (1972) 88.

deception of the forest industry and immigration societies who profited from trafficking in workers.¹⁷³

Before long Nanse found himself exposed to Gallagher's violence. Nanse witnessed not only the beating of one man for refusing to sleep in the same car with Greek workers, he also reported seeing the foreman, Archie Bellinger, return from beating a man in the woods. Nanse reported: "He told me that he whipped a boy who was quarreling and I had seen him lead the boy off." Nanse saw Gallagher shoot a black worker named John. Nance said John "had been working and had quit," attempting to leave the camp on a logging car. Gallagher threatened John "I'll whip you" to which John replied: "No, you'll have to kill me, I won't go to be whipped." Gallagher agreed, stating: "I'll kill you" and fired his pistol at John three times. John fled through the woods, and Gallagher gave chase firing his pistol "at least a dozen times." Nanse did not witness the outcome of the incident and it is unclear whether Gallagher killed John or if he escaped. Regardless of the result, the forest concealed the violence that was so common in peonage labor camps. Federal investigators such as Nanse enabled some workers to testify to their condition, and in the process brought the violent social and environmental relationships of the camps out of the depths of the forests and into the federal courts.¹⁷⁴

Quackenbos' correspondence with local immigration societies, and information gleaned from workers' affidavits, reveal the degree to which employers knowingly concealed the poor conditions of the camps within the secluded southern forest landscapes. Quackenbos communicated with Gerold Rolfs, the German Consul at

¹⁷³ Will Nanse Affidavit in DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

Pensacola, Florida, who sent Mr. Emile Lesser, the president of The German Immigration Society and the United Hebrew Charities, both centered in Birmingham, to inquire into reports of workers being retained against their will at Lockhart. Lesser visited the Lockhart camp in August of 1906 with the predetermined intent of reporting that “no peonage existed there” and found that the foreman, Mr. Harlan, was conveniently in St. Louis. He met a Mr. Kennedy and a Mr. Adler in the office. The company doctor escorted Lesser to the camp where he said: “I found no peonage.” By the time investigators arrived, Gallagher “spirited away” Buckley and Ormanskey to a “turpentine camp in the woods...[where] they were kept out of sight.” Nanse reported a second case in which Arthur Buckley and a German worker, “Jake” ran away into the woods. Huggins pursued them captured, whipped, and returned them to camp. When Lesser came from the German Consul, Huggins took Buckley and Jake into the woods to hide them from Lesser, and eventually to Pensacola to avoid their being deposed.¹⁷⁵

Like the southern lumbermen, local southern immigration officials clearly stated their own personal interest in maintaining the system of foreign contract labor in the forest industries. Lesser stated: “The German Consul at Pensacola Florida asked me to make a statement that no Peonage existed in the Lockhart camp of the Jackson Lumber Company and I did so.” An attorney reporting on the O’Hara case wrote that Commissioner E.O. Locke, the Clerk of the District Court held a preliminary trial and on the 11th or 12th of July, retained O’Hara on a charge of peonage. The attorney stated that Kirt Sanders, who “through some body’s fault, was given to escape and as I am informed, was given a hint by those in charge at Buffalo Bluff to do so...has not since

¹⁷⁵ Ibid; Irvine, “My Life In Peonage,”(1907); Mary Quackenbos Affidavit, DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

been found, although his part in the peonage seems to have been that of a brutal overseer.” Multiple interests colluded to conceal abuses in the dense isolation of the southern forests.¹⁷⁶

Immigrant labor societies stood to benefit from the system of foreign contract labor, as it was a profitable business in the South. Lesser acknowledged that Gallagher was a “brute” but stated that he personally favored the: “increase of German immigration to the South,” as it “was a good cause and that the state should endorse the opening of an immigration office abroad to direct European immigrants to the South.” Rolfs stated that “any conviction for peonage would materially hurt Southern Immigration” by restricting the flow of workers to the forest industry camps. Quackenbos wrote that Lesser believed and stated that any letter attesting to peonage in Lockhart “would not hurt the company” because U.S. Attorney Mr. Sheppard told him they “could not convict the company unless it was proved that the company authorized Gallagher’s abuses.”¹⁷⁷

Lesser’s testimony was crucial to the investigation into the Lockhart operation, and it confirmed Quackenbos’ assertion that southern local authorities and rural isolated landscapes facilitated employers and foremen’s concealment of labor abuses. Quackenbos asked Lesser if he heard the testimony of Mr. Mihaly, who claimed he had been beaten on Laurell Hill Road, as well as the corroborative testimony of Mr. Paul, Dr. Craig, and his wife. Lesser replied: “No. I did not go to Laurell Hill where that man was supposed to be whipped, I did not talk to any people except the company people while I was at Lockhart, and the men who were Germans and were working there.” Quackenbos’

¹⁷⁶ DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

¹⁷⁷ Mary Quackenbos Affidavit, DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

investigation of peonage abuses in Florida revealed extensive systems that undermined workers' physical safety, personal mobility, and individual freedom.¹⁷⁸

The attention brought by the Harlan and O'Hara cases as well as Alexander Irvine's article brought the abuses at the Jackson Lumber Company to the attention of the U.S. government and the public at large. Both the trials and the article brought peonage labor abuses to the mélange of Progressive reform, but not an end to its widespread practice. *The New York Times* reported that "in the guise of a magazine writer...as Miss Grace Winterton, [Quackenbos] compiled a mass of evidence which was so startling in its truth and proof that Assistant Attorney General Charles W. Russell was immediately designated by the government to begin an exhaustive prosecution." William S. Harlan, manager of the Jackson Lumber Company, was convicted and sentenced to eighteen months in prison and a \$5,000.00 fine. Foremen Huggins and Hilton received sentences of thirteen months and \$1,000.00 fines, and Gallagher received 15 months and a \$1,000.00 fine. Jackson Lumber Company lawyers used legal appeals to drag out the Harlan case in what U.S. Attorney R. Pope Reese called "open defiance to the lawful process of this Court and the mandate of the Circuit court of Appeals." Reese said: "it might be well for the Department to call the matter to the attention of the President that he might be given the opportunity to revoke the commutation of sentence of imprisonment upon Harland, Huggins, and Hilton." Thus what began as owners' opportunistic visions of productive southern forests and workers'

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

desire for reasonable labor and employment in pastoral southern landscapes turned into a legal dispute of national political significance.¹⁷⁹

The pro-business Republican administration clearly favored the continuing development of southern forests and offered its support to southern lumbermen. In 1909, President William H. Taft agreed to commute the sentences of Harlan, Huggins, and Hilton but only after they “surrendered to accept the action of the court.” The Jackson Lumber Company attorneys persisted in defying the courts by filing ‘habeas corpus writs’ until eventually the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Government’s prosecution in November, 1910. Responding to the pressure of southern lumbermen, Booker T. Washington wrote a letter on behalf of Harlan because he had consistently employed black workers at Lockhart, saying: “there are few men anywhere in the South who have stood higher than Mr. Harlan or have done more for the development of the South.” The violent social and environmental relationships characteristic of the southern forest industry ultimately represented progress for the South and even Booker T. Washington who, concerned as he was with the abuse of African-American laborers, sought to leverage the support of southern lumbermen for his various social causes by vouching for their reputation in employing black workers and bringing economic development to the South.¹⁸⁰

The combination of worker resistance, federal investigation, trial, and convictions, along with nationally published media attention exposed the brutal labor regimes and the environmental dangers of the Jackson Lumber Company labor camps. In 1907, Alexander Irvine reported that the lumber industry media sent a photographer

¹⁷⁹ Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery* (1972); “Woman Will Help in War Against Trusts: Mrs. Quackenbos, Attorney General’s Assistant, a Lawyer and Member of Old New York Family,” *New York Times*, September 15, (1907).

¹⁸⁰ Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery*, (1972) 90-93.

to the Lockhart camp to document the conditions there. *The Lumber Trade Journal* of New Orleans took pictures of Gallagher, workers they called simply “lumberjacks,” and the camp saloon. Irvine wrote that: “The entire gallery of pictures might illustrate some body’s back yard in the heart of a city, but of the lumber camp there is not the faintest suggestion.” Later that summer, a cyclone destroyed the Lockhart camp leading Irvine to report that: “every man in the cars got more or less cut up.” One worker asserted: “it rained pitchforks,” several of the sleeping cars caught fire and burned up, and one black worker named George Jackson suffered a broken leg. Even after the trials came to an end and the storm destroyed the camp, industry media and muckraking reformers portrayed forest industry labor camps in terms of workers’ exposure to the dangerous physical environment. Thus the Lockhart camp remained a site of violent social and environmental relationships.

The Department of Justice peonage files and Irvine’s article attest to the centrality of peonage labor spaces as crucial and common sites of labor violence and environmental danger in the twentieth century South. Peonage labor spaces embodied the opportunity variant social and ethnic groups envisioned in the South; revealed how divergent visions of land use created conflict between workers, foremen, and federal deputies; and signified both the continuity of coercive labor and the progress of industrial infrastructure in the South. Even after the convictions of Harlan and O’Hara, and the success of the 1911 Alonzo Bailey case outlawing indebted labor, peonage remained widespread throughout southern forest industry and agricultural labor regimes. The relationship between isolated rural industrial spaces and peonage labor continued through the changes brought to the region by industrial and agricultural

mechanization of the 1920s and the demographic migrations surrounding U.S. involvement in the two great global wars of the twentieth century.¹⁸¹

Ultimately, modern lumbering was different than railroad construction in the Florida Keys, though Jackson's operations included the use of railroads. The introduction of industrial technology into the woods made them uniquely dangerous work environments, and the forest landscape facilitated a more fluid set of labor and environmental relationships. The great southern forests provided natural resources to both corporate conglomerates like the Jackson Lumber Company as well as local residents seeking to profit off of the woods. Many of the lumbermen who supported Jackson and opposed the DOJ prosecution of Harlan and O'Hara were small landowners who profited from harvesting trees for railroad ties or chipped and scrapped the oleo resin for turpentine in the naval stores industry. Southern turpentine owners recruited their labor from the poor, largely black work force that lived in the region. Employers and workers saw turpentine work as a traditional way of life, but one that workers resisted with their mobility, creating a perennial challenge to employers who in turn colluded with law enforcement and the federal government to maintain an indebted labor force. So too did the Democratic party's gentlemen's agreement of 'home rule' and the federal assistance of the New Deal and war time commercial regulation serve landowners and employers at the expense of poor black turpentine laborers. By the early twentieth century, the naval stores industry advanced and either through northern factors or foreign competition, southern naval stores workers were part of a modern financial and industrial system that devalued hard labor in order to maximize

¹⁸¹ DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1; "Mary Grace Quackenbos and the Federal Campaign against Peonage: The Case of Sunnyside Plantation Randolph H. Boehm," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* Vol. 50, No. 1 (Spring, 1991) 40-59.

profits all while avoiding legal prosecution or public scrutiny for violating peonage statutes.

Unlike the railroad and modern lumber industry, tapping pine trees for turpentine required little mechanical machinery, and instead of working in uninhabited forests where labor had to be imported, turpentine employers relied on a regional short scale migratory labor force who knew the woods and the work. Though some of the immigrant workers in the Jackson tract worked tapping trees for resin, the wider naval stores industry relied on local white and black labor, which lived in camps onsite and often worked seasonally and by the task in the pine drifts. Owners typically provided minimal housing quarters and offered food, clothing, and medicine through a commissary, and many workers lived in the turpentine camps their entire lives. The majority of turpentine workers lived in a pattern of cyclical debt that practically amounted to a system of peonage labor, though of a more familiar and perhaps less violent tinge than that of the FECR or the Jackson Lumber Company labor camps.

Turpentine owners such as the Langdale family of Fargo, Georgia argued that the landscape informed their identity as “woodsmen” and that their local informal practice of turpentine cultivation was both a form of environmental conservation that relied on peonage labor and eventually federal assistance. They lived and labored alongside their black peons who they believed chose turpentine work out of a cultural identification with the woods. The hard toil and poverty that workers experienced as a result of being indebted by employers reinforced an expressive and violent culture inside the camps, which local law enforcement failed to regulate and which faded only with the demographic shifts and economic transformations of the manufacturing and service economy of the mid-twentieth century.

Chapter 4:

“...a real woodsman:” The Langdale family’s informal forest conservation and peonage labor in the Okefenokee forests.

On a warm April day in 1911, John Wesley Langdale, aided by his trusty hounds, walked the woods of his land on the western edge of the Okefenokee Swamp near Fargo, Georgia. Tired and thirsty, he stopped and took a drink of water from the swamp. Upon returning home, Langdale grew ill with typhoid fever. His illness worsened over the course of two months in the intense summer heat until he died on June 7, 1911. Langdale’s family recalled that he was “a real woodsman.” As a young man, he settled in Fargo in the 1880s and he made his living as most people in the region did, off of the land. He fished and hunted in the forest nearly every day. He raised hogs and cattle he claimed were “native to the woods.” He dealt in forest industries, created turpentine stills, built a sawmill in Echols County, and acquired hundreds of acres of land, in the process becoming one of the wealthiest men in the area. To his family, Langdale embodied the ethos of Okefenokee woodsman culture that was deeply rooted in independent, informal use of forest ecology. At the same time though, he also relied on the exploitation of peonage labor to profit in a modern, dynamic market economy.¹⁸²

Following his father’s forest entrepreneurialism, Harley Langdale inherited the family business and in May of 1919 he incorporated it as the J.W. Langdale Company. The company included real estate, naval stores, lumber, livestock, and a mercantile exchange. Like his father, Harley Langdale raised his three sons in the woods and Harley Jr. and John J. Langdale learned to be woodsman from their father and his black

¹⁸² John Lancaster, *Judge Harley and His Boys: The Landgdale Story*, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2002).

laborers. Eventually they earned university degrees in forestry, and attained powerful and lucrative positions as state conservationists, railroad company directors, and forest products managers. By 1960, the Langdales' holdings included more than one hundred-fifty thousand acres of swamp woodlands worked by hundreds of hands. In multiple oral histories and interviews the Langdale men described themselves as woodsmen, workers, conservationists, and labor managers. Harley Langdale Jr. attributed their success to their knowledge of the woods and their ability to exploit cheap labor through debt peonage. The Langdales described the turpentine business as both a natural way of life and a form of environmental conservation that blended local informal ecological values such as mixed agriculture and hunting and foraging, with academic forestry principles. However, the Langdale's economic success relied on maximizing turpentine operations by illegally exploiting the labor of vulnerable men and women through debt peonage.¹⁸³

The Langdale's Turpentine camps and the workers who labored there embodied both peonage labor regimes and the resilient southern "woodsman" culture. Labor relations inside the Langdale camps involved complex notions of opportunity, freedom, and obligation that shifted with the mechanization, outward migration, and agricultural reforms of the early 20th century. Managers demanded hard labor, offered little pay, and operated intricate systems of provisions and penalties to entice and retain workers inside the camps. Workers sought opportunity and independence in the quarters and pine drifts, and they responded to exploitation in complex modes that asserted their own personal identity as woodsmen. The isolated pine drifts, swamps, and turpentine stills were dangerous work spaces where workers experienced great hardship as well as some nominal independence. Some workers considered forest labor a "way of life." The

¹⁸³ Harley Jr. Interview in Forest History Society archive, Durham, North Carolina, (1991).

housing quarters, commissary, and “juke joints” inside the camps were dynamic spaces reflective of violent, racially charged culture workers called the “rough life.” Turpentine workers directly confronted the difficult physical environment of southern swamp forests and contended with exploitative bosses, violence, and poverty as best they could. Often, workers fled the camps seeking opportunity elsewhere, encountering dangerous repercussions from bosses and local law enforcement officials.¹⁸⁴

Both the Langdale oral interviews and workers affidavits in the Department of Justice archives confirm that by the early 1940s, turpentine employers confronted increasingly difficult economic and political imperatives. Workers sought opportunities in urban centers and foreign competition drove down profits. In the process employers often colluded with local law enforcement to retain their labor force. Managers often employed violence and violated the legal rights of workers in the process. When coerced, many workers sought legal recourse with the F.B.I. and the Justice Department. By 1945, global market forces and worker mobility contributed to the decline of the Langdale camps and the larger turpentine industry in the United States. The Okefenokee turpentine camps offer a unique perspective on southern rural industrial cultures during the volatile period of the inter-war years when antiquated forest labor regimes succumbed to global market forces.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁴ “Spirit of the Pines,” A documentary film in Forest History Society archives, Durham, North Carolina, (1980); Robert Outland, *Tapping the Pines: The Naval Stores Industry in the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004); Will P. Jones, *The Tribe of Black Ulysses: African American Lumber Workers the Jim Crow South*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

¹⁸⁵ Langdale, FHS, (1991); DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1; Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed: America’s Underclasses From the Civil War to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California press, 2001); Daniel Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name, The Re-enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Double Day, 2008); Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2003) 32-33.

In the wake of the First World War, the United States, and the South in particular, grew increasingly urban. Americans and Southerners embraced a national popular culture forged through new media including radio, Hollywood films, and an increasingly commercialized culture that celebrated consumer capitalism and recreational leisure. Black outward migration to southern cities and northern industrial jobs changed the social character of the country, bringing southern dialect, gospel, blues, and country music, and soul food to northern urban working class communities, informing white audiences and forever infusing uniquely black southern cultural expressions into the wider American mass culture. National news media celebrated shared economic expansion, fretted over the financial collapse, depression, and another international war even in the midst of widening poverty in rural areas. In a period characterized for such drastic change and shared experience, southern woodsmen laboring in rural industries such as the Langdale turpentine camps were left behind.¹⁸⁶

The Langdale turpentine farms in the Okefenokee swamps embodied several crucial tensions unique to rural industrial labor regimes and to the intersections between white landowning woodsmen such as the Langdale men and the mostly black communities of workers who also identified as woodsmen. The Landgales uniquely blended progressive conservationist forestry practices while simultaneously relying on highly exploitative and illegal labor regimes that worked men hard, paid them little, and ensnared them and their families in a cycle of poverty and debt. The Landgale turpentine camps were part of a dynamic global market system, and evidence suggests workers knew they were subject to volatile systems of international finance, although to

¹⁸⁶ Fon Wyman Boardman, *America and the Jazz Age: A History of the 1920s* (New York: H.Z. Walck, 1968); Page, Smith, *Redeeming the Time: A People's History of the 1920s and the New Deal* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991).

what degree is unclear. Workers cultural expressions reflected the difficult physical labor, poverty, alcoholism, and violence they experienced in the turpentine camps. Likewise, the Langdales and other white employers relied on “enticement” which generated physical violence among neighbors, law enforcement, and kinship networks in the Okefenokee swamps. As in other peonage labor camps, the physical environment facilitated exploitation of workers and often made their lives miserable. The Langdales in particular, and their business more broadly make it clear that the environment in the Okefenokee Swamp informed their way of life and contributed to their identity as woodsmen workers.¹⁸⁷

Like many early Anglo-American settlers on the southern frontier, John Wesley Langdale followed the Native American tradition of utilizing the rich natural resources of the Okefenokee Swamp. This dynamic ecological zone consists of 438,000 acres of cypress forests, marshlands, lakes, and islands within the present day state of Georgia. The swamp evolved over seven thousand years and rests in an enormous peat filled bog atop a saucer shaped depression, which once lay beneath the surface of the ocean. A naturally occurring line of saw palmetto trees indicates the boundary of the swamp. The Native American Deptford, Swift Creek, and Weeden-Island cultures occupied the swamp for nearly 2,500 years prior to European colonization. The Choctaw tribe, which inhabited the area prior to white settlement, called the area *okefenoka*, or “the land of the trembling earth” due to the peat beds and sand floor which caused the land to shift suddenly underfoot.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ Langdale, FHS, (1991); DOJ Files NA, RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-162-1.

¹⁸⁸ A.D. Cohen, ed., *The Okefenokee Swamp: Its Natural History, Geology, and Geochemistry* (Los Alamos, New Mexico: Wetlands Surveys, 1984); George W. Folkerts, Lucian Niemeyer, *Okefenokee* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002); Mark Van Doren, ed. *Travels of William Bartram* (New York: Dover

The Okefenokee cypress and long leaf pine forests support a diverse ecological system of over four hundred plant and animal species including alligators, bears, great cranes, cottonmouth snakes, and carnivorous sundews. Temperatures range from below freezing in the winter months to over 100 degrees in the summer with high humidity. Average rainfall reaches over sixty inches per year and thunderstorms are common. Lightning constitutes one of the swamp's most important features, for naturally occurring fires enriched the fertility of soil and facilitated rich grass growth. The combination of earth, rain, and fire along with wildlife and human labor contribute to a dynamic, constantly changing landscape. The Okefenokee has historically been an ecological and social space characterized by its isolation and community. The swamps and forests provided security and independence as well as subsistence to those who lived there, and also yielded commoditized resources to indigenous cultures, Anglo settlers, and African-Americans seeking opportunity in the landscape.¹⁸⁹

White settlers pushed out the Choctaw and Creek cultures in the early 19th century, but they carried on the natives' mixed-use ecology of hunting, fishing, and farming in the forest swamp. The Langdales and their neighbors and kin, such as the Burnetts and the Carters, prided themselves on their frontier ecological practice of living off wildlife and subsistence agriculture as well as engaging in forest industries. They also raised "woods cows," sold trees for railroad ties and housing construction, and tapped long leaf pine trees for oleo-resin and boiled it in stills to make turpentine. Tapping trees for rosin constituted a local way of life in the Okefenokee swamp. Perhaps the oldest industry in North America, networks of coerced labor and turpentine crops

Publications, (1928) p. 56; Josh Piker, *Okfuskee: A Creek Indian Town in Colonial America*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004) 1-10; 111-118; 125-130.

¹⁸⁹ Cohen, *The Okefenokee Swamp*, (1984).

connected the isolated pine drifts of the great southern forests to Atlantic and global markets since the early 17th century.¹⁹⁰

Turpentine cultivation began in North America in the seventeenth century. Environmental and labor historians assert the apparent continuity of coercive labor regimes in turpentine camps dating back to slavery regimes that began in the Carolinas and expanded into the forests of Georgia and Alabama. They also reveal that the growth and prominence of the naval stores industry were driven directly by the demands of an expanding Atlantic market system. The task labor system, born in the rice plantations of colonial Carolina, also developed in turpentine farms throughout the South as bound and free labor negotiated their relationship with owners in the context of isolated southern forest landscapes. In addition, turpentine camps were dynamic mobile enterprises, and innovation in technology led operators and workers to improve extraction methods throughout out the 19th and 20th century. Until the Civil War, landowners cultivated the forests through slave labor. As such, attracting and retaining workers became central to the woodsman culture in the post-bellum period. The Langdale men saw themselves as part of a long tradition of southern woodsmen and labor managers challenged with retaining forest workers.¹⁹¹

The Langdales were practitioners of the local woodsman culture as well as market-oriented entrepreneurs that reached back to the colonial era. Generating turpentine for profits required managing a skilled and regimented labor force. The

¹⁹⁰ Outland, *Tapping the Pines*, (2004); "Spirit of the Pines," FHS, (1980).

¹⁹¹ Cohen, *The Okefenokee Swamp* (1984); <http://www.srh.noaa.gov/ffc/?n=clisumlst>; Allan Galloway, *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670-1717* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Claudio Saunt, *A New Order of Things: Property, Power, and the Transformation of the Creek Indians 1733-1816* (Cambridge: UK: New York, Cambridge University Press 1999); Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

Langdales viewed their handling of turpentine labor as part of their identity as members of a historically continuous woodsmen culture. Human labor was a central component of the Okefenoke forest ecology long before the Langdales developed their turpentine operations. As Anglo-Saxon and Scots-Irish settlers migrated into the backwoods of Georgia they took up the subsistence agriculture, hunting, fishing, and foraging of their indigenous predecessors. However, white and black woodsmen and their Indian trading partners increasingly participated in the Atlantic commercial system. In the 1700s, the trade in deerskins and eventually the naval stores industry connected the isolated forest region to Atlantic markets. Thus, Okefenokee woodsmen identified as local, semi-autonomous, frontier individualists while simultaneously laboring and cultivating products for the Atlantic market economy. During the volatile market cycles that characterized the inter-war years, most turpentine operators acquired forest industry labor pools by attracting workers with provisions and retaining them through contracts and debt. Thus the Langdales' local conservation ecology relied upon peonage labor.¹⁹²

The Langdales were part of an extended kinship network within a community that lived and labored on their forest swamplands. Harley Langdale Jr. said of his family, "we're workers, as my father used to say. [Langdales] were always down in those woods." Langdales settled in the woods of frontier Georgia, as did many, because it was the most isolated, impenetrable, and thus readily available land in the region. The land "was just sort of thrown away," Harley Jr. claimed. Langdales were "poor and worked hard and didn't have anything and land wasn't worth much...they was scuffling,

¹⁹² Harley Langdale Jr. Interview, FHS (1991); Gally, *The Indian Slave Trade*, (2003); Outland, *Tapping the Pines*, (2004);

but they were honest, hard working people.” Their identity and sense of independence came from their perception of the woods as their personal space. The Langdales staked their reputation on their family history and their ability to survive off of the forest.

“They were very good substantial citizens...a lot of them [had] a few acres, penned the cattle at night, grew sweet potatoes and sugar cane and corn and beans...but it was a poor sort of living...hard living too.”¹⁹³

John Wesley Langdale spent much of his young adulthood hunting alligators for their hides, rounding up cattle and swamp hogs, and buying and selling timber rights for profit. His grandsons retold stories of John stalking alligators at night, using his lantern to catch the reflection in their eyes. He used an axe to “chop them on their head,” skin them and use the meat for food. He could supposedly call swine from as far as five miles away and herd them 30 miles to sell in distant markets at St. Augustine, Florida. Langdale hunted birds and harvested their feathers, which his wife then used in her hat business. In November of 1899 he bought and sold timberlands belonging to four of his neighbors, John W. L., Dave L., F.R. Allen, and John S. Manhim, offering the buyers a sixty-day option. Langdale’s frontier lifestyle did not set him apart from his kinfolk and neighbors in the piney woods, but his business acumen did.¹⁹⁴

Langdale accrued a significant income and increased the quality of life for his family while instilling in his sons an appreciation for the swamp as a source of both recreation and long-term profits. Langdale believed boys should be raised in the woods, as they were a male space. His sons went to school three months a year and spent the rest of the year working the turpentine crops. In 1905, John Wesley Langdale sent his

¹⁹³ Claire Strom Interview Harley Langdale Jr. (2003).

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

wife and daughters to live in Jasper, Florida, so the girls could receive a proper education, but Langdale remained at their country home with the boys and his “stiller,” John Franklin Register, who was later struck down and killed by a bolt of lightning while tending the copper turpentine still. Harley Langdale, who was born in 1885 and grew up on his father’s estate in Council Georgia, recognized the dangers of forest labor at an early age, and sought to become a businessman who could use the swamp as a source of recreation and profit rather than as a laborer.¹⁹⁵

After grammar school, Harley attended Normal College and Business Institute in Abbeyville, Georgia. After college, he returned to Council, married a local schoolteacher, and managed a twenty-eight thousand acre tract of land owned by his father. He ran a turpentine operation, sold timber for railroad crossties, and occasionally contracted with lumber companies. Harley went on to study law at Mercer University and eventually became a lawyer and a judge. Most locals called him “Judge Harley,” conveying his social status, and he used his professional connections to expand the family business and become a leader in the wider southern turpentine industry. In 1919, he created the J.W. Langdale Company. By purchasing land below market value, Judge Harley expanded his family holdings. “The going price of land was two or three dollars an acre.” Billy Langdale remembered, “My daddy bought some [for] as little as twenty-five cents an acre.” Shrewd business sense and negotiating for reduced compensation allowed the Langdales to carve significant profits out of the forest landscapes.¹⁹⁶

In keeping with Okefenokee woodsman culture, Judge Harley continued his father’s cattle business, managing thousands of head of steers, which he sold to local

¹⁹⁵ Lancaster, *Judge Harley and His Boys*, (2002).

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

restaurants for two dollars a piece. The cattle, on which many families in Echols county depended for survival, lived and bred in the woods. Cows and oxen ate the green moss that grew in the swamp. Locals called them “woods cattle” and Harley Langdale Jr. described them as “kinda rough” with horns. “Some of those cattle are just as mean as they could be...they were hard to pen.” When railroad companies built tracks through the area they altered the grazing patterns of forest cattle. Companies erected fences to keep cattle off the tracks, but Harley Jr., who later worked for the Georgia Southern & Florida Railroad and later became director of the company, remembered identifying dead cattle on the tracks by the buzzards circling overhead. Eventually screwworms and cow ticks infected many of the cattle. In the 1930s, federal programs to eradicate the parasites angered many local cattlemen who responded to what they perceived to be federal intrusion with acts of sabotage and gun violence. In contrast, the Langdales viewed their informal ecology as a means to maintaining their independence, but they did not always reject federal programs meant to encourage conservation.¹⁹⁷

Though Judge Harley was essentially a businessman, he still deeply identified with woodsman culture, which he saw as a set of land and labor management practices mixed with recreational use of the forests. The Judge loved hunting wild hogs and birds. Like his father before him, the Judge walked the swamps and woods of his family estate, carrying a rifle and a flask of homemade corn liquor locals called “buck.” “My daddy never was one to do much manual labor.” Billy Langdale recounted. But Judge Harley managed his forests for profit and loved spending time in the woods. “He’d sleep

¹⁹⁷ Claire Strom Interview Harvey Langdale Jr. (2003); Claire Strom, *Making Catfish Bait Out of Government Boys: The Fight Against Cattle Ticks and The Transformation of the Yeoman South*, (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2010); Strom’s work on local resistance to Federal Cow Tick removal programs addresses the significant role of free range cattle to the yeoman woodsmen ideology of independence and self-governance.

out there,” Harley’s sons recalled. Like his father before him, he hunted alligators at night, used corn to attract wild hogs locals called “piney woods rooters,” sometimes catching as many as a hundred at a time and herding them to market. Locals in the Okefenokee let their cattle and swine roam free in the woods. As part of this informal land use, owners sometimes captured livestock they considered wild or unclaimed by their neighbors and marked them as their own. Harley branded his hogs and cattle with the “swallow fork and an underbit in each ear.” Langdale traded hogs to his neighbor, Bob Brown, near Blunts Ferry, for Brown’s homemade grape wine. Langdale took the grape wine he bought from Brown and put it in the commissary at the turpentine camps to sell to his workers, connecting local informal land use to peonage labor regimes.¹⁹⁸

Judge Harley’s children fondly recalled growing up in the country. They enjoyed “roaming through the woods, the opportunity to observe the flight and nesting of birds, and the beauty of rain falling in sheets through the pine trees.” They remembered visiting kin, bathing in the same swamps where they fished. Billy Langdale said, “While you were taking a bath little catfish...would be nibbling on your toes...we’d take a fishing pole and catch him and clean him and then...fry those fish.” To the Langdale men, life in the woods meant both opportunity and hardship. Being woodsmen allowed them to remain relatively self-reliant, but forging a life from the swamps meant contending with a rugged and difficult physical environment.¹⁹⁹

As grown men, the Langdales remembered their family estate as an isolated and poor place. “It was a large county with low population,” Billy Langdale recalled. “Echols county is mainly timber and swamp.” Folks in the pine swamps lived off the land but

¹⁹⁸ Lancaster, *Judge Harley and His Boys*, (2002); Strom Interview with Billy Langdale (2003).

¹⁹⁹ Ibid; Langdale, FHS (1991).

had few material possessions or currency to buy goods and services. “Back in those days nobody had anything...just home living, eating and goin’ around the farm or fishing, whatever you did to live. I’d ride around with my daddy, [I] wouldn’t have no clothes on except a pair of overalls, no shirt, no shoes.” The Langdales grew their own corn and killed and prepared their own game. In addition to subsistence farming and hunting, the Langdales’ ability to harvest rosin from the pine forests allowed them to generate a good income. Harley Jr. explained “...it was mostly from naval stores that people got something to eat and got ahead a little bit, made a little bit of money.”²⁰⁰

The Langdale’s informal local ecology was based on turpentine farming, which involved difficult labor, and Judge Harley’s boys learned the hardship of turpentine work at a young age. Judge Harley operated hundreds of crops of turpentine; each crop required at least fifteen men to chip, scrape, and collect the gum from the trees. Judge Harley knew many of his workers by name and provided living quarters and a commissary to them at a cost, and offered them commissary goods on credit, indebting them to the company in the process. The Langdales depended on their labor in order to profit from the woods. “You’ve got to have a lot of labor,” Billy admitted, “blacks mostly, and there’d be some whites.” On the farm the Langdale children played with the children of turpentine camp laborers. They remembered the “little colored boy” who drove the girls in an apple-box wagon pulled by a goat. The boys scrapped buckets and chipped trees alongside men named “Black boy,” “Cut-eye,” and “Dad.” John remembered that he “learned how to dip and chip from them.” Eventually, Judge Harley brought a young black man, Eddie “Boy” Hall from the turpentine camps to live and work at the family home in Valdosta. Hall was sixteen when Langdale hired him as his

²⁰⁰ Lancaster, *Judge Harley’s boys*, (2002); Claire Strom Interview with Billy Langdale (2003).

personal assistant, and the two developed a close relationship. Hall worked around the house and accompanied the Judge on hunting trips. The children reported that Hall was a “talented quail hunter” and a deacon in his church.²⁰¹

Judge Harley put his sons to work in the family business, initiating them into woodsman culture through a rite of passage marked by hard labor alongside his black forest hands. John J. Langdale remembered that he “worked in the woods...with the mules and the horses...dipping gum.” Harley Jr. worked stacking pulpwood and admitted that the black workers taught him how to properly scrape and dip the gum from the trees, not his father. John W. spent summers working as a dipper at the turpentine camp in Tarver, Georgia, and eventually Harley Jr. was given the position of “foremen” on the dip squad. The Langdale boys described the hard labor they and all turpentine workers experienced in the swamps. William recalled that he carried crossties from the swamps, “[I] sometimes tripped over a cypress knee and the cross tie fell on top of me.” The work was “boring,” he recalled, “not to mention strenuous and unpleasant because of [the] heat and insects.” John W. remembered, “the mosquitoes were very bad in [the] swamp.” Workers used the swamps to cool themselves off and alleviate the nuisance of mosquitoes. John W. said he often “sat down in the water. The water came up to about my neck. Of course that made my body mosquito free, and it relieved my suffering from the heat.” But the swamps also contained dangerous creatures, such as poisonous snakes and the infamous alligators the Judge hunted at night. Judge Harley thought that every swamp should have at least one alligator in it, “at least until it got big enough to eat a dog,” then he’d kill it.²⁰²

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

The Langdales' turpentine management practices blended both local ecological values and Progressive academic forestry. While they harvested some timber for sale, their primary trade was tapping the pine trees for turpentine. Maximizing gum production required careful management of the local ecosystem, and as such, the Langdales protected their trees against fire and insects, and condemned the wasteful practices of other companies. Harley Jr. recalled that his father, "was progressive to some extent...we followed [him] in that way...We had a policy of being conservative." The Langdale men long believed that the nature of the turpentine business was conservative because it re-used trees; they only cut them down to sell for pulp after they tapped them of all the gum each tree produced.²⁰³

Judge Harley taught his sons to conserve the life of their trees by not tapping them with too many faces. The "slash" pine that produced the most gum could easily be chipped to early or too often, thus reducing the longevity of the tree. Harley Jr. explained the importance of "putting up one turpentine face, not putting two, to work the tree out but putting one and let the tree rest a little bit, put another one there and then you'd have a vein you could put another one." Harley Jr. expressed his belief that no tree that could be used to produce turpentine should be cut for lumber. This maxim stemmed partially from his personal conservative principles of maximizing resources as well as the practical rationale that fewer markets existed for pulpwood, or even timber, than for turpentine. "really all the income [made by] most everybody down in this section of the country came from naval stores. Sawlogs didn't bring any money, cross ties to some extent, and you didn't have any pulpwood market." However, if conserved,

²⁰³ Harley Langdale Jr., FHS, (1991).

slash pines might produce gum for 15 years, providing reliable income in a low cash economy.²⁰⁴

Factors offered landowners such as Harley Langdale access to capital and linked the isolated labor spaces of the Okefenokee to Northern investment and foreign trade markets. Factors became a major institution throughout the South in the mid 19th century. Harley Jr. explained: “See in the wintertime you didn’t make any crude gum, that was [an] expense...you had your labor and you had commissaries and you furnished them everything.” In winter, workers prepared trees, placing cups and gutters on tree faces. By spring, usually in April, factors expected owners to start paying back their loans, “borrow in the wintertime, pay it back in the summer time, and you do that every year.” Factors charged exorbitant rates, often as high as eight percent interest on their loans. In addition they charged two and a half percent on gasoline for trucks, mule feed, and wholesale groceries for workers. Langdale recalled “It was a big business but it was easy credit, hard to pay back.”²⁰⁵

Local banks considered forestlands “wastelands” and thus refused to loan to owners directly. “Finty’s company” financed the Langdale operations consistently. Factors might hold as much as five million dollars in capital, borrowing from local and national banks. “One factor got most of his money out of Chicago,” Harley Jr. recalled. Factors controlled the turpentine market by dealing directly with export markets, controlling supply and manipulating prices. “Particularly the export markets...” Harley Jr. explained, “factors had those kinds of things sewed up. They could get several thousand drums of rosin together...you couldn’t hardly get out from under them.”

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid; Outland, *Tapping the Pines*, (2004).

According to Harley Jr., the only way to get out from under the debt of factors was to pass the cost on to his labor by working the men hard and paying them little. “Most of all turpentine labor was black labor, if you could handle those and knew how to get the work out of them, well then you could get along with the factors pretty good because you could operate.”²⁰⁶

The turpentine business fluctuated with the overall prosperity of the economy. The crude gum, or oleo-resin, was a raw product which chemical plants broke down and finished into solid rosin or liquid turpentine. Rosin went into soaps, varnishes, and many chemical solvents. Turpentine most commonly went into paint thinner and industrial cleaning agents. Both rosin and turpentine sold in domestic and foreign markets, predominantly in England and the Netherlands. In the 1930s, the depression decreased demand for oleo-resin, creating a surplus of gum, driving down prices. But Harley Jr. explained, “The thing that really broke them was the fluctuation of the price, manipulated by the factors and the brokers, and the exporters.” In the tradition of the cooperative agriculture of the Populist era, Judge Harley sought to protect his profits and in 1936, he founded the American Turpentine Farmers Association in order to counteract price fluctuations and market manipulations by factors and brokers. Harley Jr. explained: “The main purpose was to stabilize the market.”²⁰⁷

As part of New Deal era agricultural relief programs, the Federal government extended significant resources to support southern turpentine farmers who experienced profit losses due to large surpluses of product and deflated prices. The Commodity Credit Corporation stepped in and provided loans to the ATFA if they withheld their

²⁰⁶ Ibid; Harley Langdale Jr. FHS (1991).

²⁰⁷ Ibid; John J. Landgale FHS (1991).

resin from the market. The CCC, a part of the National Recovery Administration, was widely criticized and was eventually declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Many businessmen viewed the program as restraining competition, but the Langdales viewed the program as a “great blessing.” Harley Jr. stated, “I don’t think the CCC ever lost any money on loaning money on rosin because they made a level there and during a period right during the war they would sell it out at a profit. We’d get [an] extra bonus from them when they’d sell some of it.” In addition to the CCC, the Naval Stores Conservation Program paid farmers to quit tapping their smaller trees in an effort to preserve forests. “They were talking about more conservation, growing more trees, getting trees bigger for lumber. So those two things helped us considerable. I would say that was one program I just couldn’t criticize.”²⁰⁸

By the late 1930s, Judge Harley’s sons took over the family business, regularly serving as managers of turpentine operations, labor camps and the workers who lived there. They earned college degrees in forestry conservation, and through incorporation, consolidation, and labor management, they continued to develop the family business throughout the volatile period of the inter-war years, when labor mobility and mechanization of agriculture changed the turpentine industry markedly. Harley Jr. graduated from the University of Georgia in 1937 with a degree in forestry and became an apt manager of his family’s forests. He continually developed his knowledge not only of current forestry practices, but also of regional industrial networks, government regulations, and global lumber markets.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁸ Ibid; Robert Biles, *The South and the New Deal*, (Lexington KY; University Press of Kentucky, 1994) 38-52.

²⁰⁹ Harley Langdale Jr. FHS (1991).

Harley Jr. believed his family developed their unique land use practices directly from their personal knowledge of, and history with, the land itself. The limitations of the environment dictated his families approach to maximizing resources. “This land down here is what they call wet lands...it has a hard pan under it...its not very productive, and so we try to plant a species of tree that will grow the best on that particular piece of land.” Specifically, slash pine grew naturally in lowland swamps and was easy to regenerate. They replanted the slash pine in spacious rows to allow for better access for rosin harvesting, instilling, a utilitarian order into the woods.²¹⁰

However, Harley Jr.’s academic training, even in a southern state university connected him to intellectual networks that crossed national, cultural, and environmental boundaries. In college, Harley Jr. learned—as many American forestry students, including Gilford Pinchot, had before him had—from European literature on forest management. Langdale described the distinction between academic forestry principals and his personal regional experience in the Okefenokee. Professors used German forestry books translated into English, which espoused practices that he claimed “really didn’t pertain to what we’d been doin’ in the South. We didn’t have fire protection, we didn’t have the markets, and nobody had the money to practice forestry.” However, in his forestry studies, Harley Jr. developed an appreciation for wider concerns of resource sustainability, global markets, and federal regulation that were not widely valued by his fellow lumbermen in rural Georgia. Thus his formal academic training allowed him to embrace forestry management practices that were distinct from those of many of his neighbors in the Okefenokee forests.²¹¹

²¹⁰ Strom, Harley Langdale Jr. Interview (2003); Harley Langdale Jr., FHS (1991).

²¹¹ Ibid.

The Langdales competed with lumbermen and what they called “peckerwood mills” or “push hard mills” that cut trees for their immediate market value and wasted the trees potential output. Most operators abandoned trees after 3 to 6 years. Much of it was then cut for lumber. Before 1909, turpentine operations typically did not last more than 10 years in one location. Harley Jr. accused the pulp wood mills of “selling out” to the large lumber manufacturers when prices went up. They also tapped trees higher and higher to get quicker results. They cut tree faces “higher than the ceiling,” chopped trees full of wormholes, and even sold burned wood to the pulp mills. Harley Jr. argued they wasted as much as half of the trees’ total value doing so. These quicker, less sustainable methods forced the Langdales to compete, often losing money. Most producers questioned whether pulp and paper mills were going to put them out of business.²¹²

Judge Harley’s emphasis on maximizing resources and Harley Jr.’s training in forest conservation as well as their ready adoption of federal forestry strategies played a crucial role in the success of the Langdale Company. Harley Jr. learned that the prime age at which a tree produces gum is between 18-20 years. Many farmers cut Long Leaf and Slash Pine trees as soon as they could to make quick profits. When farmers cut trees too early, they lost out on the potential productivity of the tree. Some operators tapped trees as early as seven years old. “The Forest Service was a leader in trying to have forest regulations,” Harley Jr. stated. They taught farmers to plant trees in 12 foot rows, replace them in 35-year rotations, and to regularly thin around the trees to protect against fires. They also helped form the Timber Protective Organizations (TPOs) throughout the southern forests. Under the Naval Stores Conservation program

²¹² Harley Langdale Jr., FHS (1991).

the federal government “stepped in,” he explained, and “encouraged [farmers] not to [cut] anything less than nine inches in diameter.” In this capacity at least, Harley Jr. welcomed government intervention in local forest management practices.²¹³

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, conflicting land use practices among local woodsmen in the Okefenokee, the U.S. Forestry service, large scale turpentine operators, and lumber companies pitted the Langdales against many of their neighbors. The Forest Service and big lumber sought to protect forests against fire that might damage their crops. The government undertook massive education programs to convince locals living near their forests to help prevent wildfires. Local mixed land use practices long employed fire to regenerate grass for cattle, and some woodsmen, including the Langdales, practiced informal fire prevention methods. However, many locals often started fires accidentally while distilling moonshine, while others burned forests intentionally to damage lumbermen’s financial profits. In the words of Harley Jr., fires could “wipe out a forest and an operator.” The Langdale men all recalled the regularity of fires and “confrontation with illegal operators,” resulting in personal violence and destruction of property and farm equipment.²¹⁴

The Langdales believed their use of fire was both local and conservative and that their practice set them apart from forestry experts and some of their neighbors. In addition the use of controlled burning and the prevention of wild fires constituted a

²¹³ Ibid; *American Turpentine Farmers Association Minute Books*, Digital Library of Georgia, Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies, Walter J. Brown Media Archives and Peabody Awards Collection; Sarah Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); For scholarship on mechanization and southern agriculture see: Pete Daniel, *Breaking The Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

²¹⁴ Harley Langdale Jr. FHS (1991); James Greely McGowin, *South Alabama Lumberman, The Recollection of His Family*, Forest History Society, Santa Cruz California, (1977); Greely noted: “There was considerable conflict between the people who were farmers in the area and those who were lumbermen over grazing and fire in the woods;” “Forestry with Jackson Lumber Company: Fire Prevention and Selective Cutting Produce Results,” *Southern Lumberman*, FHS, (December, 1925).

difficult and dangerous aspect of workers' responsibility in the Langdale camps. The Langdales and their workers set fires annually to clear under-brush, regenerate soil and grass for their cows, and prevent unintentional fires that might damage their timber. They made a clear distinction between burning and "controlled burning" to indicate their purposeful, careful use of fire. Harley Jr. recalled a visit to Valdosta in the late 1920s by famed advocate for the turpentine industry, Dr. Charles Herty. Fifteen or twenty men assembled in the county courthouse to hear Herty discuss the potential for improving the turpentine industry in Georgia. Herty shocked many in the crowd when he asserted that the greatest hindrance to forestry in South Georgia came from those who "burn their woods every year." "He didn't say 'control'" Harley recounted, "He said 'burn their woods every year.' And we did back in those days." Landgale explained that they burned in order to protect their "investment in the cups and gutters and gum in the trees." The Langdales consistently cleared grass one foot in diameter around each tree face to prevent damage to their crop. "Then you would burn the woods and hope those faces would not catch." Harley repeated himself, perhaps revealing his dismay, "[Herty] said the greatest hindrances [to forests] were wildfires and the turpentine operators."²¹⁵

Harley Langdale Jr. defended his family's use of fire as both conservative and local, but fires in general remained a significant threat to turpentine trees and thus to the Langdales' profits and their workers' security. Farmers, cattlemen, and liquor still operators were not the only source of fire. In addition to killing John Franklin Register, lightning storms caused regular fires that represented a danger to turpentine crops and workers' safety. Naturally occurring thunderstorms in the spring and summer months

²¹⁵ Harley Landgale Jr., FHS, (1991).

carried with them the danger of possible wild fires. John J. Langdale and his workers often spent nights awake, monitoring the forests for fires during hot, dry years. William remembered spending many summer nights vigilantly waiting to put out any potential fires. John J. stated that fires were the only part of managing forest industries that he did not enjoy.²¹⁶

Whether burning to defend against spontaneously occurring fires or to preemptively protect trees, fire protection represented an extensive and consistent aspect of labor in turpentine forests. “We had the turpentine labor, and we had the backpack pumps.” John explained, referring to the water canisters workers carried on their backs into the woods to extinguish fire. Workers carried out a series of practices meant to protect turpentine trees against the threat of fire. In order to keep underbrush from getting too close to their crops of trees, the Langdales workers regularly cleared out the pine drifts. John J. explained “we wouldn’t have anything over about three years [of] rough [brush]...we’d go there and rake the debris around those trees and burn it again, get the rough down.”²¹⁷

Next to fires, insect infestations represented the greatest danger to the Langdales’ turpentine crops. The Langdales lost trees to the infestation of several different types of insects. Turpentine beetles regularly struck trees, tunneling beneath the bark, weakening the wood, and making it more susceptible to Ips and pine bark beetles. Ips beetles, or *Ips calligraphus calligraphus*, *Ips grandicollis*, and *Ips avulsus* attacked trees particularly in dry periods, when trees are freshly cut, or “when natural events such as lightning storms, ice storms, tornados, and wildfires create large

²¹⁶ John J. Langdale, FHS (1991).

²¹⁷ Ibid.

amounts of pine suitable for the breeding of beetles.” John J. recalled that they lost as much as ten percent of their trees due to insects. Insect damage increased dramatically when they began using sulfuric acid on the trees. The acid “put a strain on the tree that kept the wound open.” The Langdales stood apart from many local lumbermen in their conservationist approach to managing forests.²¹⁸

A crucial part of the local informal ecology and culture of the Okefenokee was homemade liquor. Southerners manufactured 100% corn whiskey, moonshine, or “white-lightning” in stills not unlike the turpentine stills used to cook pine tree gum. Billy Langdale remembered that his father Judge Harley made his own liquor called “corn buck,” which he kept in the same shed where they cured meat. Liquor stills expanded during prohibition, and for many rural Southerners, cooking whiskey became a secondary economy. “If we saw a liquor still we just made out like we didn’t see it...it was almost looked at as an honorable industry for people.” Not all distillers took precaution with their operations, and according to Billy Langdale, “there was a lot of deaths caused by liquor that wasn’t properly made.” However, southern woodsmen continued to drink. The Langdales’ neighbor, Lewis Corbett, made “a lot of money out of it, and he was a very honorable citizen.” When asked by the interviewer, Dr. Claire Strom, why liquor stills were so prevalent in Echols, Georgia, Langdale replied, “It depended on the isolation of the land.”²¹⁹

Liquor in general was part of rural southern culture, and the Langdales expressed their belief that alcohol use and the violence associated with drinking were

²¹⁸ Robert C. Thatcher, *Identification and Biology of Southern Pine Bark Beetles*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, (1985); <http://na.fs.fed.us/spfo/pubs/fidls/ips/ipsfidl.htm>; Cohen, ed., *The Okefenokee Swamp: Its Natural History, Geology, and Geochemistry* (Los Alamos, New Mexico: Wetlands Surveys, 1984).

²¹⁹ Strom, Billy Langdale Interview, (2003).

direct products of the remoteness of the landscape and the volatility of the community. “Back in those days...I guess we’d be like a frontier...a little old common town...had ten, eleven, twelve bars in town. Farmers would come in just like the western, they would drink till they got drunk...fightin’ and carrying on you know just like it was a wild place.” Langdale expressed the common knowledge that “a man with liquor can’t maintain.” He also explained the relationship between alcohol, family and class divisions, and violence by saying “there was some family feuds...some little family spats...some families were a little bigger than others I guess.” The fact that some families made out better than others reflects a fact that historians have long overlooked—woodsmen in the Okefenokee may have been part of an isolated, informal culture, but folks there were highly conscious of social and economic status. In fact, the Langdales’ informal conservation land use practices relied on divisions of labor and power relations that stretched back to the early modern era but which intensified during the inter-war years.²²⁰

The Langdales believed, as some turpentine workers attested, that tapping, scraping, and distilling oleo-resin constituted “a way of life” for many people in the region. Camp foremen regularly described their labor as a distinct demographic that preferred turpentine work for its solitary nature and the tight-knit community centered around the workers’ quarters. Dipping gum allowed workers some degree of nominal independence, and interviews with turpentine workers in the post war era reveal that they themselves expressed a cultural pride in being turpentine workers, partially because it was difficult labor, but also because they claimed to love the isolation, natural beauty, subsistence, and recreation of the forests. However, many workers, not unlike

²²⁰ Ibid.

the Langdales themselves, acknowledged the extreme difficulty of turpentine labor and the system of peonage that plagued them. The tension between on the one hand, the pastoral notion of a labor force, personally drawn to the work of the pine drift, and on the other, the clear system of political and economic peonage designed to retain workers, remains a central contradiction in the turpentine industry.²²¹

In order to acquire labor, recruiters, or “cruiters,” as workers often called them, sought out labor in the South by advertising in local and regional newspapers or physically seeking them out, offering provisions and incentives to hire on. A 1915 advertisement in the Florida newspaper, *The Breeze*, read as follows: “Wanted: 20 negro Men, who will chip or pull twenty crops of Turpentine Boxes or Cups as they are or where they are.” Foremen and managers competed with one another for workers. The Langdales used moonshine to entice workers off of other farms. William Langdale recalled traveling to Florida with a “tracker who knew the hunting grounds” near the town of Crawfordville. William Langdale wasn’t tracking animals so much as he was men. Once they found a group of men in the forest, they loosened them up with liquor and “pitched the job to them.” Langdale offered to pay the accounts at their current or previous jobs, transferring their debt to his camp. He also offered to move their belongings. This common practice, which southern employers called “enticement,” reveals the complexity of peonage labor regimes. Employers sought labor and offered potential workers accommodations in an attempt to attract them, often instigating

²²¹ 20th century employers borrowed heavily from early modern European racial and environmental ideologies which incongruously touted African physiological traits suited them for southern rural agricultural labor; Timothy Silver, *A New Face on the Countryside: Indians, Colonists, and Slaves in South Atlantic Forests 1500-1800* (Cambridge: New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Daniel C. Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, c. 1981); U.B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York: D. Appleton 1918); Woodruff, *American Congo*, (2003).

violent conflict from previous employers, while simultaneously ensnaring them in a cycle of debt and obligation designed to retain workers in their camps.²²²

Workers in the Okefenokee region also participated in the informal forest ecology and identified themselves as members of the unique southern woodsman culture. The heavily obstructed spaces of the swamp forests forced operators to send workers into the pine drifts relatively unsupervised. Employers expected labor to perform their job efficiently and effectively. Workers supplemented the meager provisions employers offered by hunting forest wildlife, fishing, and raising pigs. Turpentine workers developed a reputation for their strength, skill, and environmental knowledge in the southern pine forests. Workers often learned turpentine skills from their elders and began chipping and scrapping as early as ten years of age. They lived with and worked alongside the animals of the camps, especially mules and dogs. Often, workers responded to the severity of the camp conditions by expressing both desperation and resilience, revealing their suffering and determination. Sometimes they responded in anger and violence. Above all, workers recognized their unique position as woodsmen and skilled labor in a complex, volatile industry.²²³

Turpentine camps were both informal ecological and cultural spaces that consisted of single men and families. The size of the camps depended upon the number of pine tree crops, which largely determined the number of workers and their families. Many workers were single men, some of whom only lived and worked in the camps

²²² Carroll B. Butler, *Treasures of the Long Leaf Pines Naval Stores*, (Tarkel Publishing, 1998); "Spirit of the Pines" FHS, (1980).

²²³ Robin D.G. Kelley, "*We Are Not What We Seem*": *Rethinking Black Working-Class Oppotition in the Jim Crow South*, *The Journal Of American History*, Vol. 80, No. 1 (June, 1993), 75-112; See Also James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Resistance in South East Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

temporarily. However, cultural anthropologists who studied turpentine camps in the 1970s confirmed what the Langdales and other white employers and black workers claimed: that many workers lived and labored in the camps their entire lives, even if they migrated between camps within the long leaf pine region. Families passed down the skills of chipping, tapping, and distilling oleo-resin from one generation to the next. Some workers were born and died inside the camps without much exposure to the outside world. Camps grew and declined in response to market and demographic forces, and the communities inside the camps were as dynamic and complex as the industry itself.²²⁴

The physical amenities of turpentine camps revealed both the community spirit of workers as well as the system of debt peonage that entrapped them. The center of turpentine communities were the camp “quarters,” a legacy of the slave system, which generally included a few dozen shanties, a barn or lot for work animals, milk cows, or hogs, and a copper still housed in an open two-story structure with a brick fireplace. A separate structure housed the cooper shed where workers manufactured and stored barrels. Large camps had a wagon shed and blacksmith shop for making repairs, and a few had small sawmills accompanying them. Nearly all camps had a commissary where workers bought food supplies, work clothes, and tools when necessary. Most camps contained a “juke” where workers drank, danced, and gambled after work, and many camps had a cemetery not too far from the quarters. Some families had their own cemeteries. Workers often used wagon wheels, truck axles, or pieces of light stone and wood to mark the headstones of their kin.²²⁵

²²⁴ “Spirit of the Pines,” FHS (1980).

²²⁵ Butler, *Treasures of the Long Leaf Pines*, (1998); “Spirit of the Pines,” FHS (1980).

Housing in the quarters consisted of aging, crude structures, repaired with spare scrap materials that created a patchwork aesthetic, signifying both the poverty and ingenuity of forest workers. The number of shacks depended on the size of the crops and thus the number of workers. The houses generally had shiplap walls, wooden floors and solid wood windows with no screens, allowing mosquitoes to penetrate them during the day, and raccoons, rats, and snakes at night. Some homes were larger than others and some had porches, but they were all generally dilapidated structures, which left workers exposed to the physical environment of the forest. The shacks provided no running water or electricity. Some had beds, a small table and set of chairs; however many did not. Workers commonly provided their own mattresses and cookware, along with whatever tools they needed. Workers generally owned only what material belongings they could carry, or what employers could help them move in a wagon or trailer.²²⁶

Turpentine workers' daily lives not only revolved around the physical environment of the forests, their labor constituted a crucial role in the formation of the pine drift landscapes. The informal forest ecology relied upon workers clearing and planting pine forests to produce the maximum desired output of resin. Harley Jr. explained that they cut trees from the swamps and replanted them, literally cultivating the pine drifts by hand. Workers planted the pine trees in rows roughly a dozen feet apart. From March through October, men carried out the chipping, scrapping, and dipping of gum from mature trees. The Langdale men recalled: "Life in the turpentine woods...[was]...most hard work and drudgery." Their identity as woodsmen came as much from their love of the forests as their baptism through hard labor in the pine drifts. Workers recognized the Langdales' social position as white landowners and

²²⁶ Ibid.

foremen, but they also claimed a similar identity as woodsmen based upon their labor in the Okefenokee.²²⁷

The typical workday consisted of waking at four a.m., feeding the mules, oxen, horses, and chickens. The men harnessed the stock animals, and prepared to travel into the pine drifts before dawn. The chipping process was done by hand through a “short chopping motion of the arms.” With one or two strokes on each side of the tree, workers cut away the bark to reveal the gum inside the trunk. Men carried out the chipping every three days otherwise they reported the gum crystallized and hardened on the face of the tree. Employers expected workers to completely chip a full crop of roughly 10,000 trees each week. Large operators separated dippers from chippers. Men dominated axe work and dipping, though occasionally women and young boys dipped gum.²²⁸

Workers went back to perform the dipping process, or collection of gum, monthly. Employers generally paid workers fifty cents to a dollar per barrel, a wage that remained consistent throughout the 1900s and 1920s. The Langdales generally paid fifty cents per bucket of gum. The wagon drivers who carried the buckets into the woods kept track of the amount of gum emptied into the wagon by each woodsman. Most foremen hired older more trustworthy workers who might not be able to walk the long hours required to scrape gum, but who could manage the mule drawn wagon and whom they trusted to keep an accurate count of the buckets.²²⁹

Some turpentine farms had “side camps” that lay a distance removed from the camp and the main crop of trees. Moving woodsmen to and from the main camp to

²²⁷ Harley Langdale Jr. FHS, (1991).

²²⁸ Butler, *Treasures of the Long Leaf Pines* (1998) 29-30.

²²⁹ Landgale FHS 1991; “Spirit of the Pines,” (1980).

scattered timber tracts took several hours per day by mule or wagon. Side camps often had tents or wagon structures where workers might live for short periods while harvesting the crop. Whether walking to and from the pine drifts or camping temporarily in the side camps, turpentine laborers spent their lives in the woods, often distanced from their employers. They often walked the pine drifts alone, perhaps with a dog for a companion or a mule to pull the dipping cart. They admittedly took time for a nap in the shade of a tall pine, or swam in the swamps to cool themselves off. This nominal independence represented one of the most attractive qualities of the woodsman culture, especially for poor, dependent black southerners who consistently negotiated their own control over domestic and agricultural labor relations and sought to limit white oversight as much as possible.²³⁰

Workers coped with the drudgery of camp life by maintaining a resilient, expressive culture that sustained them and their families in the face of the toil and debt they experienced. The 1980s documentary film “Spirit of the Pines” captured the unique sub-culture that Dr. Albert Ike attributed to the “isolation” of the camps. The “rough life,” as workers called it, was reflected in the labor, recreation, and cultural expressions of turpentine workers. The men and women of the camps labored, loved, gambled, fought, cursed, sang, and prayed. Workers expressed their highest hopes and greatest frustrations while at work and in the juke joints after work. Violence often erupted between workers over various transgressions. The stories and songs that come out of

²³⁰ “Spirit of the Pines,” FHS, (1980); Ronald L.F. Davis, *Good and Faithful Labor: From Slavery to Sharecropping in the Natchez District 1860-1890* (Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977) 79-80; 93-95; 120-121. See also Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977); See also Charles Orser, *The Material Basis of the Postbellum Tenant Plantation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988); Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1866-1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

the camps convey a culture that could only have been produced in conditions of brutal labor and grinding poverty.²³¹

In the pine drifts, workers sang to pass the time, ease their labor, and express their shared circumstance. They expressed both their exploitation and their resilience in the working and living spaces of the turpentine camps. John W. Langdale recalled that a worker would announce his dumping of a bucket with a “musical call” so that others at a distance from him in the forest could hear him. “Put one down for my baby,” he might sing, or “Dollar bill,” or “I owe de man.” Workers sang most of the day in what Judge Harley Langdale called “a long quavering chant.” A man would sing: “Woke up this morning aweepin’ and amoanin, Goan try to make a dollar for me, a quarter for my baby. Said I’d cut a hundred. And it looks like I’m gonna make it. So I want you boys to help me. For I’m agoin to howl.” The other workers hearing him replied with “amens” and “yes man” and “help him lawd” or “oh yes.” Workers expressed their keen awareness of debt peonage through their songs, supporting one another in the African-American “call and response” idiom. This particular song explains the complex system of peonage labor in a vernacular unique to workers, which owners wrongly perceived as an almost romantic hymn.²³²

The commissary served as an important physical space where workers often met and shared their lives but was also representative of the institutions of peonage where high costs and interest rates entrapped workers in cyclical debt. The isolation of turpentine camps prevented workers from accessing alternative stores or wholesale grocers. They had no choice but to purchase a portion of their food, household goods,

²³¹ “Spirit of the Pines,” (1980).

²³² Ibid.

and tools from their employers. One commissary from the W.W. Harrison Farm in N.W. Florida belonging to The West Florida Naval Stores Company of Pensacola, Florida kept dried beans, condensed milk, sugar, coffee, flour, salt, rice, black eyed peas and cane syrup. Commissaries also sold clothes such as boots, clack hats, brogans, overalls, shirts, and cotton stockings. Employers largely stocked their commissary with goods from factors or merchants who charged exorbitant interest rates, a cost which employers passed on to their workers. Harley Langdale Jr. confessed, somewhat indifferently, that in order to profit from turpentine crops, employers had to squeeze their labor, often forcing them to work for long periods without pay and charging their workers high prices for provisions on credit, which they then used to retain labor on threat of legal prosecution for violating contracts if they refused to work or left the camps.²³³

Food in the camps generally consisted of corn, meats hunted, or raised in the camp, and assorted vegetables sometimes grown in personal gardens or trucked in from the factors and merchants who supplied the camps. Hunting was a way of life for many in the turpentine camps and dippers and chippers often took rifles into the woods, or used traps to capture rabbits, squirrels, or the occasional deer. Depending on time and the availability of fertilizers, some camps had gardens where workers grew mustard and collard greens, sweet potatoes, and corn beans. Workers and their families also raised chickens and pigs inside the camps. Specialty recipes included a dish called “dooby” that consisted of cured meat, onions, and cornbread. Often, cooks used raccoons or possum

²³³ Ibid; Butler, *Treasures of the Long Leaf Pines* (1998).

meat and well-supplied commissaries provided cane syrup to go with nearly every meal.²³⁴

The Commissary often served a dual purpose as a social space after work and on weekends. The “juke” which was sometimes housed in a separate building, allowed workers to relieve their physical and emotional strains and it also operated as a nexus of cultural solidarity and economic entrapment. Socializing at the juke included heavy drinking. Workers drank “corn buck” whiskey, or “buck” for short, made from fermented crushed corn. Grape wine was also a common drink kept inside the camps, as were various concoctions called “low wine,” made from alcohol strained from “Sterno” stove fuel. Cooks and foremen mixed this jellied alcohol with sugar water and nitrate spirits. Another common drink, “coondick,” was a mixture of grapefruit juice and sour mash whiskey. Judge Harley placed both his own homemade liquor and the wine he traded from neighbors in the commissary of the turpentine camps. It was widely accepted that foremen used alcohol to entice and retain workers in the camps. Billy Langdale stated “you had to have some kind of alcohol to keep hands around. It was hard work, they probably needed a drink at the end of the day.” But other foremen recalled “we had to watch the whiskey, workers jukin’ all night, and not workin” was considered bad for business. After drinking all weekend, many workers suffered terrible stomach ailments and hangovers.²³⁵

Workers commonly referred to the first day of the workweek as “Blue Monday.” Foremen noted that often little real work got done on Mondays and worker productivity was severely impacted. Workers slept in or worked all day repairing

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Ibid.

broken tools, likely broken on purpose to stall the work regiment. Troy Dukes, an “old time turpentine” who ran the Langdale’s Tarver camp dealt with blue Mondays by taking a gallon of moonshine and combining it with cold medicine, paregoric, “Raymond’s Little Liver Pills,” and “Black Draught” syrup to concoct a homemade laxative. Most of the outhouses sat directly behind the quarters and Dukes watched the workers “coming and going about all day long.” William P. Langdale recalled: “the next day they’d be just as pretty and nice as you’d ever seen, and they’d go to work the next day.”²³⁶

Gambling was another aspect of turpentine camp life that represented the system of debt peonage and also served as a means for woodsman to express their masculinity and independence. Men hoped to win money and bragging rights playing cards; however, losing perpetuated the debt workers lived under and worsened their immediate financial circumstances. The most popular game in the juke was called “skins” or “skin games,” which involved four to six players each dealt one card. The dealer set the minimum bet and players made side bets throughout each hand during the game. Men made bets not only on cards, but on each other’s behavior and other miscellaneous events inside the juke. The dealer turned one card at a time. When the discard matched the card of that of any player, that player lost, or “got skint.” That player may then draw a discard from the top of the deck and re-enter the game. Players placed new bets and the game continued. Once the dealer moved through the entire deck, dealership shifted to the player to his right. Just like the family feuds Bill Langdale recalled of the local saloons, gambling often led to violence between workers.²³⁷

²³⁶ Strom, Billy Langdale, (2003); William P. Langdale, FHS, (1991);

²³⁷ Butler, *Treasures of the Long Leaf Pines*, (1998).

Violence was a common occurrence in the juke, often growing out of disagreements over gambling or other social quarrels and reveal another key facet of both peonage and workers' cultural expression. Exacerbated by drinking and gambling, tempers flared and men often got hurt. Many workers carried a weapon known as a "hack" or "puller" or "cutter." These "cutters" were actually tools of the turpentine trade. Workers fastened the devices used to scrape the buckets of turpentine gum into make shift knives, which they used in fights. These tools allowed a worker to kill a snake while walking in the drift or to gut an offending opponent inside the juke. Billy Langdale recalled at least one occurrence when "two men fought at the juke with cutters as weapons." In the heat of a brawl workers also improvised using hot grease, boiling lye, or steaming water that they threw on their opponent's bare skin.²³⁸

Violence came to characterize the "rough life" in turpentine camps. Owners and foremen viewed worker violence as unavoidable and they colluded with local law enforcement to keep disputes from drawing legal repercussions to the business. Law enforcement rarely got involved in disputes inside the camps. Employers expected foremen to manage disputes, even in the case of violence or death without drawing the attention of the authorities. Both owners and workers preferred to avoid the attention of law officers. One operator near Fargo, Georgia, J.F. Eldridge explained:

If a law officer comes into a turpentine camp you immediately lose some of your hands. They pull out. Turpentine Negroes are largely transient and they get into trouble in various places with the law, so they move out and go to a camp in some other region and when the law shows up you commence to lose your hands. So every time a new sheriff was to be elected he appeared at Fargo, in my office, and said among other things 'I can promise you one thing, We'll never come to Fargo unless you send for us. We'll never have a deputy come into your territory unless you send for him. You handle it and if you can't handle it, send for us.' There was a perfectly good reason and they all did it just that way. We didn't have a single law officer in that place.

For instance, when we had a man killed, a white man, we didn't send for the coroner or the sheriff. I'd go out and pass up and down the street in Fargo and get together five or six chaps—the man who ran the fillin' station and the man who ran the grocery store and son on—and we'd drive over to the

²³⁸ Ibid; Strom, Billy Langdale, (2003).

scene of the killing and interrogate all the people we could and then I'd come back and write it out. 'We six white citizens over twenty-one in the county of Clinch (Echols) have set upon the body of John Hicks and discovered that he came to his death by gunshot wound in the hands of parties unknown.' Signed by six names, that was it. It was sent to the coroner and cleared the records and that was all of it. We never found anything but that.²³⁹

Turpentine farm owners and foremen systematically used debt to retain workers in the camps. This practice stemmed from the contract labor laws of the post-bellum period whereby black labor was forced to abide by labor contracts or face jail time, whereby the state could lease them out to private companies. A Florida statute from 1891 made it unlawful to accept “money or other personal property” through agreement to perform services and then to abandon “the service of the said hirer without just cause.” Southern state legislatures established these contract laws to retain labor by ensnaring workers in the legal system. Punishment for “jumping contracts” could be as much as one year in prison. Thus the use of debt to keep laborers in the camp was part of the larger legal system that coerced labor throughout the South.²⁴⁰

Harley Langdale Jr. and William Langdale both asserted that by the 1940s, especially after World War Two, labor grew scarce, and that profiting off of turpentine required keeping workers in the camps. Interviews with the Langdales conducted by Dr. Claire Strom and the Forest History Society understandably avoid any discussion of their personal transgressions against workers in their camps. However, Billy Langdale admitted to engaging in an armed confrontation with another manager while “recruiting” workers, and F.B.I. files in the national archives provide ample evidence of other family-run turpentine camps in the vicinity of Valdosta, Georgia wherein fathers and sons engaged in violence with workers and other labor managers in order to retain

²³⁹ “Spirit of the Pines,” (1980); Jones, *Dispossessed* (1992).

²⁴⁰ Ibid; Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black people in America from the Civil War to World War II*, (New York: Doubleday, 2008) 218; Mary Ellen Curtin, *Black Prisoners and Their World, Alabama, 1865-1900* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 73-74; 130-131; 135-144; 168-170.

their labor. The consistency in the records indicate that for turpentine farmers part of properly managing labor involved white owners' use of local law enforcement, and personal violence, to keep indebted workers from physically leaving their camps. Perhaps the only distinguishing factor in the cases of the Ledbetter, Kennedy, and Davis families is that workers and federal officials called attention to their crimes.²⁴¹

In the county of Atkins, at Wilacoochee, Georgia, the F.B.I. investigated a case of white turpentine employers engaging in physical violence in order to retain laborers. On June 28, 1943, George McCraine Jr., and his two sons, George McCraine III, and Baker, visited their neighbor, J.B. Ledbetter after one of their workers, a black man named Arthur Brown, left their turpentine camp to work driving a lumber truck for Ledbetter. The McCraines accused Ledbetter of "hiring away" Brown from them and proceeded to assault Ledbetter. George Jr. then knocked Ledbetter to the ground, kicking him repeatedly about the face, neck, and chest, breaking his collarbone, blackening both eyes, and bursting several blood vessels in his neck. George Jr. then pulled an automatic pistol and shot Ledbetter in the leg.²⁴²

Both Brown and Ledbetter gave corroborating testimonies to the F.B.I. Brown stated that the McCraines "came to my house and told me that I had to go back to work for them. I did not want to go back to work for [them] but I was afraid they would shoot me if I refused." Brown returned to work for the McCraines and remained employed there indefinitely. Another black employee at the McCraines turpentine farm, Murray Blair, stated he "would like to quit but [am] afraid...Mr. McCraine would...either whip me or shoot me." The U.S. Assistant Attorney General, Thomas C.

²⁴¹ Billy Langdale, FHS (1991).

²⁴² DOJ Files, NA, RG 60, File 50-20-20.

Clark, issued a “preliminary investigation” to determine if Brown was held against his will due to debt. The F.B.I. did state that Brown wanted to quit work for the McCraines because “they would not pay him.”²⁴³

Ledbetter sued the McCraines in court; however, the men were determined to be “not guilty” due to a Georgia law that stated McCraine was within his rights to shoot Ledbetter during the “fight,” as he was protecting his twenty-two year old son, Baker, who was present at the time. Ledbetter stated that he believed the trial was “fixed” and that since Ledbetter only lived in Atkins County for two years, locals wanted to have him “run out.” The F.B.I. found further evidence that George McCraine Jr. had a temper when a Valdosta, Georgia Police “Internal Security” report stated that McCraine once publicly declared that he “did not believe in God nor the President” and that he was “in favor of Hitler winning the war and taking America.” The police report indicated that McCraine was intoxicated at the time and the complaint was closed, stating that the “subject was not engaged in un-American activities.”²⁴⁴

At Ashburn, Georgia, north of Valdosta, one Tom Kennedy and his son, T.E. Kennedy Jr, also known as “Buddy,” went to excessive ends to secure two of their turpentine hands. In July of 1949, Nat Vaile and his brother Charlie left the Kennedy place and caught a bus to Olustee, Florida. On July 31, Buddy Kennedy entered the Vaile home in the quarters and assaulted Nat’s wife, Eliza, with a pistol. Kennedy fired his gun and pistol-whipped Eliza, knocking her out of her chair onto the floor, and demanded to know where Nat and Charlie were. He suspected she had bus tickets and planned to follow the men. Eliza stated that Kennedy demanded “those damn tickets”

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

but left without finding them. Tom Kennedy Sr. then arrived and searched Eliza's home, turning over furniture and emptying drawers to no avail. Kennedy Sr. informed Eliza that if she didn't give up the tickets that "Mr. Buddy was going to kill them." Later the Kennedys returned with the local police and arrested her and her sister in law, Ruby Lee, Charlie Vaile's wife. The women spent the night in jail.²⁴⁵

The following day, Sheriff Jefferson told Eliza and Ruby Lee that they should give Kennedy the tickets or else Kennedy would have them "work on the chain gang," at which point Eliza admitted to having hid the tickets in her Mother's house. Mr. Jefferson assured the women that "they were in his care and nothing was going to bother them." Jefferson then returned them to the Kennedy place where Kennedy's "woods rider," Mr. Carter, warned the women "not to leave." Shortly after Eliza and Ruby Lee fled Kennedy's place and went to meet their husbands in Olustee, Florida, Eliza moved to Jennings, Florida with her mother and father. Eliza said she would testify in court if properly protected but would not sign a statement for fear of retribution. The F.B.I. stated that she "does not want to go back to Georgia."²⁴⁶

In August 1950, Lee Otis Davis, and his son, Lonzie Davis of Douglass, Georgia appeared at the sheriff Joseph C. Wapelhorst's office in neighboring Moultrie, Georgia with warrants for the arrest of Steven Futch and Earnest Jones, two turpentine hands who left the Davis farm and hired on with Roscoe C. Turner at Moultrie. Lonzie Davis identified himself as a "deputy sheriff" from Coffee County and had Sheriff Wapelhorst accompany the men to Turner's farm, where they arrested Futch and Jones. Charlie Jones' wife, Essie Lee Jones recalled that on September 27, 1950, around 5:00 p.m., she

²⁴⁵ DOJ Files NA, RG 60, File 50-329.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

saw a white man run around the house from the front with a pistol. Futch's wife, "Ida Mae Futch, recalled that she and six small children "were [playing] in the yard...by the time we got in the house two white men were coming n the front door." Essie Lee identified the man as Lonzie Davis. Davis threatened to take Ida Mae if they didn't produce Steven Futch.²⁴⁷

Ida Mae Ftuch remembered that sometime in January 1950, her husband and Charlie Jones moved them to the Davis place to work as turpentine hands. "My husband had an agreement with Mr. Davis to work on halves," she stated. Davis charged Futch \$200.00 for turpentine boxes, acid, and "hacks" used to chip turpentine trees. The Futchs also had to purchase all their groceries from the Davis commissary. "As far as I know, my husband never did know how much he earned." Ida recalled. When Futch asked for his pay "Davis would tell him he had not made enough to pay his grocery bill." When Ida Mae got sick, Davis charged her to take her to the Doctor and additionally for the prescription. "After that we decided to leave." Steven Futch was in the bathroom shaving when Lonzie Davis "stuck his pistol in the window" and placed him under arrest. Ida Mae remembered that, "All four of the men had guns."²⁴⁸

Though it was the mid-twentieth century, the Davis' actions echoed conditions in the 1880s. When the Davis men arrived at Jones' house in Turner's quarters, Lonzie Davis carried a .45 caliber automatic pistol. According to Jones, Lonzie Davis "invited him to run so [Davis] could shoot him." Davis informed Jones that "he was the law" and then promptly arrested Jones in front of his family. Jones claimed he owed "\$153 and some cents," not the \$209 claimed by Davis. He also insisted that he had gone to

²⁴⁷ DOJ Files, NA, RG 60, File 50-243.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

Camilla, Georgia and then Jasper, Florida where he worked at different turpentine farms before hiring on with Turner. He claimed that Davis made multiple trips to Florida to attempt to get the owner, Ira Hester, to pay Jones' debt. Hester refused Davis' demand saying he could not afford to pay the \$209, and Jones informed Hester that this figure "was too much." Both Futch and Jones admitted that they owed Davis money and Davis took them to Sheriff Erin W. Johnson in Ware County, Georgia where they were accused of "Larceny." Futch and Jones promised to return to work for Davis if they could be released on bond.²⁴⁹

Davis testified that he arrested Futch and Jones because they took "the tools furnished to them" and that he only wanted the "property stolen" but he also stated that he expected the warrants would convince Futch and Jones to return to work for him. A "Special Agent" named Moore testified that he had interviewed Davis and that Davis informed him that Futch and Jones were "dissatisfied with their working arrangement" because they had "insisted on a more definite arrangement than the fifty percent split in proceeds from the gum they dipped." The actions of the Davis men show a clear pattern of using debt peonage, law enforcement power, and physical violence in order to retain their labor. This incident also suggests the workers' resilience and pro-active attempts to better their lives and hold white owners accountable for their exploitative actions. Lonzie Davis apparently was the volatile figure the Futches and Joneses claimed he was. The F.B.I. reported that in subsequent years Davis served time in Ware County, Georgia for "passing fraudulent checks" and for violating "cheating and swindling" laws in the state. In 1952, Davis purchased two tons of rice from another farmer with hot

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

checks. The Federal Bureau of Narcotics also placed Davis under investigation for his activities as both “an addict and seller.”²⁵⁰

During World War Two, swelling industrial jobs attracted rural southern workers from farms to factory floors all across the United States. Harley Jr. recalled that “labor was becoming scarce.” Workers showed a clear dissatisfaction with some of the changes in the turpentine industry. “The trees that you were working were further back in the woods. The labor didn’t mind being close to town...[but] you had them out a certain distance,” With government rations on rubber and oil, gasoline and tires grew scarce. “We used mules [again] to bring in gum from the woods—before we used a truck.” Dipping crews took a team of four mules several miles into the woods three times a day. They carried six barrels of gum at a time. Each barrel weighed approximately 500 lbs. This made the work more difficult on laborers. By 1945, William P. Langdale, who managed the Mayday turpentine camps recalled, “labor was short, you couldn’t get people to work and I got a lot of mine out of the prison system in Florida.” “I had murderers, I had every kind. I found out murder wasn’t a bad offense with that kind of labor.”²⁵¹

Throughout the 1930s and ‘40s, federal government programs, market forces, and labor migration converged to make turpentine operations impractical. The agricultural regimes of the New Deal allowed large land holders to consolidate their land and remove tenants from their property and workers likewise sought better wages in urban industrial jobs. However, naval stores were important to the war effort, and the Langdales profited during the period. They centralized their still operations, converting

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Harley Langdale Jr, William P. Langdale, FHS (1991).

twenty-five separate stills into one massive plant. They also purchased stainless steel and brass aluminum equipment. “1941 and 1942 were the first years since the 1920s that turpentine was really profitable,” Harley Jr. explained. Mechanization of agriculture had profound effects on southern turpentine camps. By the 1930s roads and bridges were built and the Model-T truck replaced the mule wagon for hauling and dipping, as well as transportation of workers. In addition, black outward migration to urban and northern industrial jobs contributed to the decline of the old turpentine labor system.²⁵²

Eventually the turpentine industry lost out to timbering and global competition. In the 1970s, the Langdales sold all their turpentine equipment to a Guatemalan enterprise and quit the business for good. By the late 1980s most of the non-timber lands in the Okefenokee were used for recreational wildlife hunting and fishing. Hunting clubs brought back the deer population for the first time since the deer tick and screw-worm killed them off in the 1920s. A Fish and Game Commission imported deer from Texas and Wisconsin to southern Georgia. However, the rural woodsman culture that the Langdales and their workers embodied remained central to the identity of white and black communities in the Okefenokee region. The informal conservationist ecology that woodsmen practiced found new expression in the environmental movement of the late 20th century when corporations such as the Langdale company, and federal parks like the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge marketed themselves as enterprises through which consumers could experience nature for a price.²⁵³

²⁵² Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, (1985)19.

²⁵³ Ibid; <http://www.fws.gov/okefenokee/>.

The Langdale Company's promotional website claims that "The Langdale Company's evolution from that first acre [in 1894] to today has followed an unceasing quest to make the most of limited natural and human resources via innovation. Every year since the 1930s, the company has planted more trees than it has harvested, and in 2009 planted its one hundred millionth seedling. That Progressive environmental stewardship provides wildlife habitat, clean air and clean water." Through its own self-congratulatory language, the company acknowledges the crucial relationship between ecology, conservation, and maximizing human labor. What the advertisement does not mention is the fact that the "innovation" of the Langdale operations included coercing labor through debt peonage and perhaps even physical violence. The Langdale's turpentine camps, a memory of a foregone era, remain rural isolated spaces continually reconstructed by human conceptions of nature, labor, and international markets.²⁵⁴

In the film "Sprit of the Pines," ethnographers filmed a man outside a Georgia juke joint playing his electric guitar in the afternoon sun and singing: "you fight on, you fight on, you keep your sword in your hand, and you fight on." In their own language, turpentine workers expressed their own identity as woodsmen and their relationship to the complex system of local conservationist ecology and peonage labor. Long gone from the Okefenokee labor camps, African American workers carried their culture of resilience with them whether into urban industrial jobs, the military, or to other similarly exploitative forms of rural-industrial labor. The economic and political shifts of the 1930s and 1940s along with foreign competition dealt a serious blow to the turpentine industry and the labor camps where workers lived. Land consolidation and

²⁵⁴ "Sprit of the Pines" (1980); <http://www.thelangdalecompany.com/our-history>; <http://nmaahc.si.edu/About/Mission>

federal policies forced millions of southerners, black and white, off of their farmland and out of the turpentine quarters into an even less secure form of commercial agriculture. The fruit and vegetable farms up and down the eastern seaboard of the United States received the weary southerners seeking decent work for fair wages. What they found was a highly exploitative migrant labor system that forced workers into peonage labor inside a volatile, isolated, and dangerous environment.

Companies like the Naples Fruit and Vegetable Company outside Naples Florida paid state employment agencies to recruit workers for jobs picking tomatoes. Not unlike the Langdales, the NFVC employers saw themselves as progressives, providing transportation, racially integrated living quarters, and provisions to their employees. However, reports from the FBI reveal that workers who traveled hundreds of miles in crowded buses arrived at the remote tomato farms outside Immokalee, Florida to find crowded housing, insufficient food, and a vicious team of labor foremen who robbed workers of their wages and physically abused them while colluding with local law enforcement. In the era of modern civil rights, peonage labor continued, facilitated by employers profit motives, the physical isolation of labor, and indifferent or impotent law enforcement. But workers and civil rights activists persisted in their resistance, attempting to expose peonage abuses and demanding that the federal government prosecute employers and protect migrant workers.

Chapter Five:

“We see no peace on the job:” The Effect of the Environment on Labor Violence in the Immokalee Tomato Growers’ “Camp Happy,” Naples, Florida, 1965.

While visiting her sister, Emma Lou King, in Pompano Beach, Florida, on Wednesday, January 13, 1965, Mrs. Willa Lee Pruitt of Flint, Michigan, met two men who told her that they had escaped from a “slave labor camp” outside the town of Naples, Florida. Walter Brinson and Richard Legget rented a room from Mrs. King while seeking work to pay for their bus fare home to Mullins, South Carolina. Brinson and Legget told Pruitt that several months before, the South Carolina State Employment office had promised them free transportation and seven dollars per day in wages if they traveled to Florida to pick vegetables. When they arrived at the Immokalee Tomato Growers Company farm, eight miles outside of Naples, “way out in the woods,” camp foremen told them that the company would deduct fourteen dollars per week from their wages for room and board and that they would not be able to make any personal contacts outside of the camp. The men stated they “were constantly under guard and were unable to leave...and were treated like prisoners.”²⁵⁵

Mrs. Pruitt contacted the local branch of the NAACP in Pompano Beach who in turn notified the United States Commission on Civil Rights and the FBI. Mr. Taylor Williams of the local NAACP chapter asked that “the president of the U.S. [and] the governor of the state of Florida” carry out an investigation into the Immokalee camp. “There is not another camp in the U.S. like this one,” he wrote. The Commission on Civil Rights contacted the Department of Justice regarding the Immokalee Tomato Growers camp near Naples, Florida reporting, “statements allege that the camp forbids

²⁵⁵ DOJ NA RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-18-120.

workers free access to the outside and in other ways maintains conditions resembling involuntary servitude.” On January 20, 1965, the FBI began documenting the reports from workers such as Legget and Brinson of “a forced labor camp” known as “Camp Happy” located eight miles northeast of Naples, Florida and fifty miles southwest of Immokalee, Florida.²⁵⁶

FBI investigations into the labor abuses at Camp Happy reveal how private business and state employment agencies facilitated a complex system of interstate labor-trafficking that led to the gross manipulation, defrauding of, and violence against, employees by foremen and supervisors who sought to profit from their positions as managers of the commercial tomato farm. The reports from laborers inside Camp Happy depict a gruesome peonage labor regime that included beatings, sexual exploitation, obstruction of justice, and unreported death. Evidence compiled by FBI agents show how migrant farm workers and sympathetic civilians in working class communities confronted the nexus of isolated farm labor spaces, exploitative and violent foremen, as well as hostile local police. Unlike the mostly male workers in the Langdale camps whose isolation left them outside the advances made in urban communities, the resilience of both male and female workers like Legget and Brinson, and the activism of citizens and civil rights organizations that helped them, represent a grass roots effort by workers and community organizations to make peonage labor camps more visible in the modern civil rights era.²⁵⁷

In the tomato fields of southern Florida, commercial vegetable employers met the challenges of a volatile environment by exploiting migrant workers through

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ DOJ NA RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-18-120; Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*, (New York: Knopf, 1998); Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement*, (New York: New Press, 2009).

peonage labor schemes. The delicacy of tomato crops, dynamic weather patterns, and global competition led growers to exploit tomato workers in order to increase their profits. Most migrant farm workers lived and labored on the land, stooping, picking, and hauling heavy produce across burning sun-drenched fields. They slept in shanty shacks or on the ground in the open air. As temporary farm laborers, they suffered from bad weather, which depressed their wages and left them subject to profit-driven growers and shrewd exploitive recruiters. Workers like Legget and Brinson's greatest enemy was their isolation from their families and legal protection. Inside rural-industrial farm camps the lack of oversight allowed labor foremen and local police to charge exorbitant fees for provisions, sexually abuse female employees, and physically abuse workers with impunity. The investigation of abuses inside Camp Happy reveals how in the context of a harsh physical environment, growers, workers, and foremen clashed over peonage labor regimes in the rural South.

The time-sensitive nature of tomato crops made human labor crucial to harvesting the delicate produce and in turn contributed to the impulse of growers and managers to exploit workers. Workers inside the ITGC camp outside Naples endured oversight from a group of labor foremen who systematically stole workers' wages, physically abused them, and colluded with law enforcement and owners to avoid legal prosecution. Foremen, sheriffs, and owners blamed workers and "agitators" for the violence inside Camp Happy and covered up their own abuses as well as the larger structural barriers that failed to protect workers from violence. The resilience of workers such as Brinson, Legget, and Pearson, as well as the local community leaders who helped them exemplify the mass resistance phase of the Modern Civil Rights Movement, where average citizens across the U.S. rejected discrimination and sought to

expose it. As economic opportunities and Federal protections such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act allowed black and white southerners to increasingly avoid the worst abuses of peonage labor regimes, undocumented immigrants who filled the ranks of migrant farm labor fell victim to the same abuses for the remainder of the twentieth century and beyond.

For centuries, the southwestern region of the Florida peninsula, identified by ecologists and historians as the Big Cypress Swamp, on the northwestern edge of the Everglades, affected and was influenced by humans who found their way to its dynamic landscape. First, the Calusa peoples and eventually European travelers and Miccosukee and Seminole societies, lived and labored over nearly 2,450 square miles of rugged, tropical terrain. Until the twentieth century, Americans and Floridians viewed this western edge of the state as a frontier landscape. Historian Gordon Harvey called it “the last truly wild place in Florida.” Mild winters and expansive vistas of black-land soil allowed early boosters to project an environmental narrative associating available land and economic opportunity onto the Florida countryside. The state increasingly lured cattlemen and eventually fruit and vegetable producers to the region. However, fierce storms as well as small changes in temperature and moisture damaged landscapes and destroyed livelihoods. Likewise, the rural isolation of the landscape facilitated landowners’ long tradition of exploitative labor regimes that ensnared thousands of workers in the forests and fields of southern Florida.²⁵⁸

After 1928, with the construction of Florida State Highway 90, known as the Tamiami Trail, travelers could cross the Big Cypress Swamp, allowing development,

²⁵⁸ Jack E. Davis, and Raymond Arsenault, eds. *Paradise Lost?: The Environmental History of Florida*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005). Robert Madison Ward, *Cold and Wind Hazard Perception by Orange and Tomato Growers in Central and South Florida*, (Ann Arbor: Dept of Geography, University of Michigan, 1973) 84, 95-97.

particularly of agriculture, on the western Gulf Coast of the state. In the 1930s, oil development in the Pineland region of the Picayune Strand on the northwestern edge of the basin fostered a land boom, and lumbermen moved into the region to log both pine and cypress from the dense forests. The clearing of the forests opened up soil-rich lands prime for fruit and vegetable agriculture. Between 1925 and 1964, tomato acreage increased from 112 to 2,500 acres in south Florida. The average grower managed 100 acres of tomato crop, and by 1964, tomato production, the primary commercial vegetable crop, was concentrated south of Lake Okeechobee, a trend that tomato growers claimed was closely related to climatic patterns and the availability of land.²⁵⁹

Although growers chose the Immokalee region for its mild weather, the Picayune Strand is characterized by volatile climatic changes caused by close proximity to the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean. The influence of numerous lakes and intense high and low pressure cells and related air masses across the region create the peculiar weather that punctuates the seasons. Fruit and vegetable growers stated they favored southern Florida because of the “near absence of freezes.” However, the approximate rain and snow levels in January reach as high as 1.7 inches for the month. In 1960, Hurricane Donna, the most destructive recorded storm to that date, destroyed large portions of fruit and vegetable crops as well as huge swaths of forests in the western Everglades. Both cold weather and wind are serious hazards for tomato growers, and

²⁵⁹ *Southwest Florida's Wetland Wilderness: Big Cypress Swamp and the Ten Thousand Islands*, (University Press of Florida, 1996); Jack E. Davis, and Raymond Arsenault, eds. *Paradise Lost?: The Environmental History of Florida*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005); Ward, *Tomato Growers*, (1973) 84, 95-97.

even minimal frost and moisture are always potential threats to their profits and the livelihoods of workers who labor in the fields.²⁶⁰

Climatic volatility and continued deforestation contributed to unpredictable weather conditions for tomato growers in southwestern Florida. In 1962, the biggest arctic air mass ever to hit the Florida peninsula destroyed vegetable crops, and after a brief recovery in 1964, a downward trend in farm earnings followed for the rest of the decade. Growers noted that gusty winds remained a serious hazard to their crops because “the land is very level and the wooded vegetation which has served as a natural windbreak is being removed.” Growers also feared wet and cold conditions, especially in January when rain and occasional snow limited the winter and spring harvests. As a result, most Florida tomato growers expressed confidence in their ability to raise good crops, even in the midst of “whimsical weather.” The Florida tomato grower’s greatest fear was that foreign competition and high labor costs would “put him out of business.” As one grower reported, “Tomatoes are perishable and cannot be held until labor cooperates.”²⁶¹

Commercial vegetable growers in southern Florida operated within a complex set of dynamic labor and environmental conditions that facilitated their exploitation of migrant farm laborers. Companies like the Immokalee Tomato Growers Inc. took advantage of warm weather, vast acreage of available land, and a multi-ethnic low wage migrant labor force that followed the fruit and vegetable harvests from the Lake Okeechobee region of southern Florida north to the farms of New York and Maine. Growers profited from inexpensive real estate prices, the rarity of winter freezes, and a

²⁶⁰ Ward, *Tomato Growers*, (1973) 105-106.

²⁶¹ Ward, *Tomato Growers*, (1973) 95-114; David Lowenthal, *Geography, Experience, and Imagination*, *Annals of Association of American Geographers*, LI (1961) 241-260.

state government that attracted capital investment though relaxed labor regulations and low taxes. However, vegetables, and tomatoes in particular, are delicate produce subject to damage from even minimal variation in temperature, moisture, and picking conditions. Growers managed the sensitive nature of their crop and the labor-intensive harvests by exploiting marginalized workers and charging them for transportation, squalid housing, insufficient food, and cheap wine inside the camps. By 1965 industry media noted that unpredictable weather and employers' "belligerent attitude toward migrant labor" all contributed to atrocious working conditions for migrant labor.²⁶²

In the wake of the Great Depression, migrant labor patterns and economic disparity began to reveal themselves across southwestern Florida's landscapes: In the words of historian Donald Grubbs, "along U.S. 441 ... limitless flat vistas of fertile ebony soil stretching out to the horizon striped with unwavering thick bars of rich green: beans, cabbage, celery, or potatoes, food for the nations tables." In addition to the agricultural produce, "occasional stretches of barbed wire enclose Brahma cattle." And all along the interstate, hundreds of yards of highway frontage were host to "filthy hovels nestled among ragweed and wastepaper." Grubs noted, "These dilapidated shacks resemble inferior chicken coups ... [but] ... these hovels are winter residences of human beings," the migrant farmers who "toil north with the sun every spring." By the 1960s, the plight of migrant farm laborers gained increasing public scrutiny as labor

²⁶² Robert Madison Ward, *Cold and Wind Hazard Perception by Orange and Tomato Growers in Central and South Florida*, Dissertation, Department of Geography, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (1973). 96-97; Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed: America's Underclasses From the Civil War to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Donald H. Grubbs, "Story of Florida Migrant Farm Workers," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (October, 1961), 103-122.

organizations tipped off Florida newspapers and national television producers to the terrible conditions in the fields and camps.²⁶³

After 1928, technological changes shaped the development of commercial agriculture and migrant labor systems. The Everglades Experiment Station discovered that by adding copper sulfate as fertilizer, the sticky black soil could be loosened and plowed for agriculture. However, the cost of irrigation, drainage, and equipment required to farm the land meant that only large capital could undertake such an operation. The region was eventually dominated by massive landholders who exploited migrant farm labor rather than by small family farmers. Mechanization of agriculture along with New Deal policies subsidizing landowners to reduce their production drove millions of southerners off their tenant farms. Many of these poor farmers joined the ranks of migrant laborers that followed the harvests up the east coast from Florida to New York every season.²⁶⁴

In addition to technological changes, the national appetite for fruits and vegetables encouraged by the expansion of disposable income during the bull market years and facilitated by the increase in refrigeration and transportation technology drove investment in commercial agriculture. The Depression undermined consumer demand greatly but it also created a surplus of labor that drove down wages and working conditions. During World War II demand for produce increased, as did transportation of fruits and vegetables to feed a hungry industrial workforce and a

²⁶³ Grubbs, 103.

²⁶⁴ Ibid; Mart A. Stewart, *“What Nature Suffers to Groe:” Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgie Coast, 1680-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

swelling military. The post-war expansion only encouraged American's expectations for cheap and available produce.²⁶⁵

In an age when more Americans lived in single family housing, ate processed foods, and worked in comfortable offices or unionized factories, government, labor organizations, and national media increasingly reported on the deplorable living and working conditions migrant farm workers endured, pointing out their exposure to the physical environment as a sign of their poverty. In 1938, the Florida Industrial Commission noted, "workers sleep in shacks, boxes, in cars, tents, or trailers, on the ground, or wherever it is possible to rest. They have no facilities for washing and no toilet facilities of any kind." Disease plagued migrant families. "Illness among migrants could be traced to ... open pit toilets next to the only water supply, or in it." One witness noted a child's typical meal consisted of a single cold corn cob or a tomato, three dried prunes, and a can of beer. The same year a state health officer reported seeing 21 sick children with acute dysentery in one camp. The agent recommended state officials close the camp down. They did not. When one added weather to the equation, a difficult situation became deadly. When crops froze, workers were left stranded without salaries, housing, or sustenance, facing exposure and starvation.²⁶⁶

Following the Great Depression, the social and environmental conditions in southwestern Florida contributed to a peculiar labor system in the fields and camps, known as "the contractor system." Many state officials and journalists saw this system, sometimes called the "crew-leader system," as "quite damnable ... [and] ... a sort of peonage system." The isolation of vegetable farms allowed crew leaders to serve as

²⁶⁵ <http://erec.ifas.ufl.edu/about/history.shtml>; Grubbs, 106.

²⁶⁶ Grubbs, 107.

middlemen, recruiting desperate laborers to ensure growers their harvest. Growers paid crew leaders by the head count. Not unlike the labor agents Sabia and Shwartz who recruited men for work in Florida and Alabama, crew leaders recruited workers by promising them consistent work and competitive wages. They often employed environmental rhetoric, “telling workers of the distant Promised Land of fruitful harvest.” They often charged workers exorbitant interest on the cost of transportation, housing, food, and liquor while in transit. Crew leaders played growers against workers, complaining about uncompromising workers who demanded higher wages then charging workers steep interest, keeping the difference for themselves. Crew leaders also commonly ran gambling and prostitution rackets and could make as much as ten thousand dollars a year.²⁶⁷

New Deal programs such as the Farm Security Agency (FSA) provided some health and housing assistance to migrant workers in an effort to counter the terrible living conditions; however, federal programs largely helped landowners and commercial farming. During World War Two, the War Manpower Commission and the Agriculture Department provided transportation and health services to migrant workers, setting up a Migratory Labor Hospital at Belle Glade, Florida. In addition, the federal government opened up some camps to house the workers. In addition to government programs, the wartime economic expansion drew many workers to factories and shipyards, reducing labor pools and creating better overall conditions for migrant farm labor. The FSA and WMC continued to carry on their welfare programs; however, private business interests and vegetable growers and their organizational

²⁶⁷ Grubbs, 112; See also Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987); Lycklama Nijeholt, *On the Road for Work: Migratory Workers on the East Coast of the United States*, (Boston, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1980).

representatives began a concerted effort to fight federal intervention into labor conditions on their farms.²⁶⁸

In 1943, the National Farm Bureau Federation (NFBF) pressed for hearings on House Resolution 96 which provided wartime programs for migrant labor. The NFBF wanted to cut further appropriations for the FSA. Growers argued that “all unworkable, hampering restrictions ... the fixing of minimum wages ... hours ... housing standards, unionization of workers be immediately discontinued.” They further demanded that the entire farm labor program be turned over to the various individual states’ farm extension services, over which the farm bureaus in each state had complete political and regulatory control. Eventually passed as Public Law 45, section 5 stated, “No funds appropriated under this Act shall be expended directly or indirectly to fix, regulate, impose or enforce collective-bargaining requirements, wage rates, housing standards, hours of work, or union membership with respect to agricultural workers.” The bill also granted the determination of all housing standards to the growers in the states. Florida’s Congressional delegation was foremost in supporting the bill backed by the growers.²⁶⁹

With authority over wages, housing, and health relegated to growers and states sympathetic to them, migrant farm workers remained subject to harsh physical conditions in the fields and camps. Reformers continued to make comparisons between migrant workers and non-human environmental phenomena. Increasing media attention brought renewed interest to migrant labor in the post war years. In 1952,

²⁶⁸ Ibid, 109; Cindy Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of Their Labor: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Migrant Poverty, 1870-1945*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); William G. Domhoff, *Class and Power in the New Deal: Corporate Moderates, southern Democrats, and the liberal-labor coalition*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011).

²⁶⁹ U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, *Permanent Farm Labor Program*, Hearings on S. 1334, 80th Cong., 1st Sess., 1947; found in Grubbs, *Migrant Farm Workers*, (1961) 111.

Senator Hubert Humphrey from Minnesota proposed a bill to raise ten million dollars for migrant education. Opponents killed the bill but appropriated six million dollars for migratory birds and fighting hoof and mouth disease in cattle. Around the same time, a Palm Beach County Health Inspector testified that most of the migrant shelters he examined were “unfit for cattle.” In the winter of 1958, an unusually cold blast forced workers from the fields to the dilapidated camps and roadsides. Reports emerged from the Immokalee area of hundreds of workers starving and freezing in the open air. The next year, Congress passed a law stating that “wage standards should meet that prevailing in the area” and that housing must be “hygienic and adequate to climatic conditions” but was only required to meet local codes. President Eisenhower even endorsed a “Committee on Migratory Labor,” which linked the plight of migrants to larger civil rights struggles. The committee stated that the migrant workers’ conditions amounted to a “striking example of denial of equal protection under the law.”²⁷⁰

The difference between good harvests and economic insecurity for both growers and workers depended upon a complex balance of environmental factors, adequate labor, and international competition. Tomatoes must be picked within a few days of a certain date in order to allow them to continue ripening while in transit and arrive on the shelf in a proper state for consumers. Fall tomatoes are usually picked between mid-November and late December. Thus precipitation, frost, and freeze are always a potential threat to growers’ profits and workers’ stomachs. In 1965, Florida growers avoided significant bad weather, reaching a peak production of tomatoes. Workers harvested over 23,000,000 40 lb crates of tomatoes from 51,000 acres of land, making up

²⁷⁰ Grubs, 116; See also: Rothenberg, Daniel. *With These Hands: The Hidden World of Migrant Farmworkers Today*, (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998); Melvin S. Brooks, “The Social Problems of Migrant Farm Laborers: Effect of Migrant Farm Labor on the Education of Children” (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1960).

nearly 30% of the total vegetable crops that year. But Florida growers reported that “increasing intrusion of Mexican tomatoes” caused them greater “anxiety, despair, and general discontent.” Florida growers stated that among them existed a “keen competition for labor,” and that domestic labor costs forced their crops to be “non-competitive with foreign production.”²⁷¹

Just after Thanksgiving in 1960, television producer Edward R. Murrow’s news documentary, *Harvest of Shame* aired on CBS, generating national public attention for the plight of the migrant farm workers and their families. The film’s rhetoric intentionally emphasized workers’ exposure to the physical environment and the more careful attention paid to animals and vegetables by growers. A local sheriff in Belle Glade, Florida, intimated the social disorder he saw in migrants’ presence. “Our main problem is ... [workers] sleep in and around the bars, in the grass, [and] packing houses.” Workers stoically acknowledged their exposure to the environment, describing the poor conditions they faced in the fields. While interviewing the Roach family, migrants searching for work, the journalist asked, “Mr. Roach, where did you spend last night with your family?” Roach replied, “Over in the woods.” Murrow’s voice narrated scenes of trucks being packed with vegetables. “Vegetables are refrigerated, and packed carefully to avoid bruising ... Cattle carried to market, by federal regulation, must be watered, fed, and rested for five hours every 28 hours.” People, Murrow continued, “men, women, and children journey three or four days for 10 hours without stop for food or facilities.” Murrow used the camera to objectify both black and white workers as if they were exotic animals. But in the workers’ stoic resolution one can, if careful,

²⁷¹ Ward, 105-106.

identify a profound resilience in the midst of terrible odds. For southern workers, simply telling their story constituted an act of courage.²⁷²

The provision of housing and transportation attracted many workers to the Immokalee Tomato Growers Camp outside Naples in the winter of 1965. Historians note the area of Immokalee, Florida, in particular for the exploitation and lack of amenities provided for workers in the commercial vegetable industry. The media portrayed Immokalee as a “frontier city” where lack of facilities placed housing in high demand, especially during the winter tomato harvests. The local newspaper in Naples, Florida, noted the importance of housing in the lives of migrant farm workers. Housing played a key role in relations between workers and employers. David Griffith explained that housing was an “important instrument of labor control.” For migrant workers who lived and labored on the land, minimal respite from the elements was a major incentive for employment.²⁷³

In 1965, several migrant workers outside Naples, confronted far worse conditions than sleeping in woods and traveling long hours in crowded buses. A series of violent incidents documented in FBI records reveal that company workers faced a tough group of white and black camp guards who physically enforced peonage labor regimes, stole workers wages, and placed strict restrictions on workers’ personal freedom in attempts to retain them in the camp. Walter Brinson reported “We see no peace on the job.” They made workers “line up just like hogs.” The ITGC camp known as “Camp Happy” supposedly employed nearly 600 hundred or more workers. Brinson continued, “The bossman whip everyone that talk about leavin.” In the absence of law

²⁷² Edward R. Murrow, *Harvest of Shame*, CBS (1960); See also David C. Griffith, *Workin Poor: Farm Workers in the United States*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995) 29-32; Paul S. Taylor, “Migratory Farm Labor in the U.S.,” *Monthly Labor Review* 44 (March, 1937).

²⁷³ Griffith, *Working Poor*, (1995) 33.

enforcement and justice systems to confront the poverty and exploitation exposed in “Harvest of Shame”, multiple workers at Camp Happy, both men and women, black and white, reported violent abuses and worked with local civil rights organizations to try to reveal the deplorable conditions there.²⁷⁴

At approximately 3:30 pm on Friday January 8, 1965, Walter Brinson and Richard Leggett had arrived at the Immokalee Tomato Growers Company farm eight miles north of Naples, to find a corrupt and dangerous peonage labor camp. Their trip to and arrival at “Camp Happy” revealed the deplorable environmental and labor conditions that characterized migrant labor regimes. The bus packed with black and white workers carried them the 713 miles from Marion, South Carolina, stopping only to pick up other workers or to let them relieve themselves on the side of the road. When they pulled into the ITGC camp, isolated “way back in the woods,” the foreman met them as they filed out of the bus. Brinson recalled that workers were forced to “line up just like hogs.” Foremen carried guns and informed the men and women of the camp regulations.²⁷⁵

Foremen told workers their wages would be seven dollars a day, but that lodging charges of \$6.50 would be deducted from their pay along with \$13.50 each week for meals and \$25 dollars for transportation on the bus. Foremen lined the workers up, issued them bedding and assigned them to “barracks type buildings.” Having worked several seasons in Florida picking tomatoes at other farms, Leggett knew that the camp was taking advantage of them. Leggett did the math in his head and knew that with the charges for food, transportation, and lodging, he would not have enough money to send

²⁷⁴ DOJ NA RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-18-120.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

his pregnant wife, Bunice, and their six children back home. The system of withholding money from workers wages for provisions in camp was a well-established racket by employers to ensnare workers in a cycle of indebted labor.²⁷⁶

The next day, Brinson and Legget went to work in the fields at 7:30 am, where they confronted the severe physical hardship of picking tomatoes in the hot, humid air. The high temperature that day reached 80 degrees. Workers carried heavy buckets on their shoulders, sweating as they filled them, adding to their weight. Employers profit by the quantity of tomatoes picked, and so they demanded workers rush from the crop rows where they stooped to pick tomatoes to the truck to unload their bucket, then back again to the rows. Armed with blackjacks and rifles, foremen yelled constantly at workers to hurry. In this hostile workplace, when workers slowed or stopped for a second to rest, supervisors threatened them with beatings if they did not immediately continue picking. Brinson and Legget both witnessed “numerous beatings” of workers by foremen.²⁷⁷

The provisions offered by the camp contributed to the injurious conditions. Brinson and Legget reportedly received two eggs for breakfast along with “1 tablespoon of grits, 1 tablespoon of oatmeal and 1 slice of bread.” At lunch, workers were given a cheese sandwich. “Both meals were unappetizing,” the men remembered. Such meager portions hardly met the caloric requirements for men performing such extreme physical activity. At the end of the day, the men retired to their sleeping quarters. They immediately noticed that the cots were pushed closely together so as to fit more bodies. The camp maintained a “wine joint,” where workers could purchase a pint of cheap wine

²⁷⁶ Brunson Affidavit in DOJ NA RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-18-120.

²⁷⁷ <http://www.farmersalmanac.com/weather-history/search-results/>

for \$1.00 or a fifth for \$1.50. Cramped and sore, many workers drank to medicate their physical and emotional pain. As a result, drunken laborers came in at all hours hollering and fighting, preventing Brinson and Legget from sleeping.²⁷⁸

After one week of working at Camp Happy, Brinson and Legget decided to leave. The men reported that they “literally escaped” because foremen denied workers access to the outside world. The company did allow workers to travel by bus to town on Saturdays; however, they charged a dollar for the trip, and workers were expressly warned that if they tried to leave the camp before they worked off their original charges for transportation, lodging, and commissary, they would be charged with the crime of “obtaining money under false pretenses.” Even though debt peonage had been outlawed in 1911, southern rural industrial employers commonly colluded with local law enforcement officials to prevent workers from leaving. Local deputies served as security forces for the camps, arresting any fleeing workers and returning them to the camp. Under the pretense of going to town to do their laundry, Brinson and Legget managed to get away, far away, nearly 120 miles to Pompano Beach, Florida, where they informed Willa Lee Pruitt of their experience.²⁷⁹

Brinson and Legget’s escape and subsequent reporting of abuses inside Camp Happy reveal that community and civil rights organization sought to expose inhumane working conditions in the rural industrial labor spaces. Several workers emerged from Camp Happy, speaking out through local African-American community leaders of the violence and suffering inside Camp Happy. Such local activism fits squarely within the broader grass roots action that characterized the modern Civil Rights movement. In the

²⁷⁸ Brunson and Legget Affidavits in DOJ NA RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-18-120.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

1960s, national media attention on larger-than-life figures such as Dr. Martin Luther King and political campaigns to end *de jure* segregation over-shadowed the wider mass resistance of the southern freedom struggle. ITGC workers were part of a long tradition of labor confrontation rooted in working southerners' attempts to battle the exploitative social order that relied on binding poor whites and African-Americans to land through indebted or coercive labor regimes. Employers, foremen, and local law enforcement in Naples viewed laborers who challenged their exploitation as 'agitators' disrupting the necessary order of the work place. Initially, FBI investigations into the abuses at Camp Happy appeared to paint a picture of unruly workers and foremen who incidentally used excessive force. However, if read in the context of peonage regimes, a more complex picture emerges, showing how foremen took advantage of isolated rural-industrial labor spaces to exploit workers.²⁸⁰

On February 23, 1965, FBI Special Agents A.A. Armstrong and Joseph H.R. St. Pierre interviewed John Salters at the office of the B.W. Morris Real Estate Company in Naples, where Salters worked as a maintenance hand. Armstrong and St. Pierre's report begins with the assertion that Salters "is a person whom others in the Negro residential section of Naples come to unload their problems." Salters reported that on the previous Saturday night, Bobby White, a young black man who worked at the ITGC camp, "showed up in the Quarters with his face injured from having been beaten." White told Salters that foremen at the camp beat him because they said he was "one of the guys the FBI sent in to spy on the camp" and as a result "some of the boys in camp were going to

²⁸⁰ The passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act gave the FBI new authority to investigate discrimination within the work place. This perhaps accounts for the swift response by the agency to the NAACP. Ibid; See Also Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *The FBI: A History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/history/a-centennial-history/and_justice_for_all_1954-1971;

quit and leave.” A black guard grabbed White and threatened him, saying, “Don’t you hear his talking? Don’t leave when we’re talking!” They held a gun on White until the white foremen, Ken Mulling, known as “Mr. Ken” arrived with another white boss. Mr. Ken accused White of being a “trouble maker” and began beating him. Salters reported that after punching and kicking White for a while, Mr. Ken “turned him over to some Negro fellows who beat him, and ... another Negro laborer at the same time.” That night, after the assault, White and the other victim “stole away from the camp” and made their way into town.²⁸¹

When agents Armstrong and St. Pierre interviewed Bobby White inside the Naples Community Hospital the same day, a more nuanced story emerged, revealing the relationship between isolated rural labor spaces and peonage. White reported that he lived in Lake City, South Carolina, and, like Brinson and Legget, the SC State Employment office told him and several other workers about the Immokalee Tomato Growers farm near Naples. The employment office told workers transportation was free and the company paid \$0.87 per hour. However, when White arrived around February 9, 1965, managers told him he’d have to pay \$13.50 per week for room and board and \$6.00 for a blanket. The camp allowed workers to ride the bus into town on Saturdays for the cost of \$1.00 round trip. On Saturday, February 13, White and his friend “Private” went to town to try to buy some pants. Finding the store closed, they returned, but the camp’s dining hall had closed for dinner, leaving them no choice but to buy sandwiches for \$0.75 cents each. White and Private walked to the small building in camp designated as the bar where they played some records on the juke box and drank a bottle of beer.

²⁸¹ John Salters Affidavit in DOJ NA RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-18-120.

Around 8:30 pm, they walked to the barracks and found several men playing craps on the floor of the dormitory. When White dusted dirt from the floor so as to clear the space for rolling the dice, another worker confronted him because, as he told the FBI, “some fellows liked having dirt stay on the floor because the dice would slide instead of roll.” The man pulled a knife on White. In White’s defense, Private broke a beer bottle and “went for the boy with the knife.” White stopped Private, and they left the barracks together and headed back to the bar where they saw Leon, a “Negroe boy” who worked as a timekeeper in the camp. White reported the incident to Leon, who took a rifle from a truck and headed for the barracks. Billy, another black guard at the camp, along with several workers followed Leon to the dormitory. White recalled that “Billy was halfway high from drinking,” and he and Leon took the knife away from the man. What seemed like a fairly common incident of a gambling dispute between drunken workers housed in tight living quarters escalated into a case of shocking brutality.²⁸²

When Billy and Leon emerged from the dormitory, Billy accused White of being a troublemaker and told him “it was time to get a blessing.” Billy began pushing White around, and White said, “You know I’m not gonna say nothin’ to you while Leon got that rifle drawn on me.” Private tried to intervene and get White to go back to the bar, but White went back to the barracks, and Billy and the others returned to the bar. Somebody telephoned Mr. Ken, who White reported was “a young white man ... one of the bosses at the camp.” White and Private decided to leave the camp right away “because it looked like someone was gonna get killed that night.” Before they could

²⁸² Bobby White Affidavit in DOJ NA RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-18-120.

leave, Mr. Ken arrived with Billy and Leon and said aloud, “This is the way you supposed to do for troublemakers” and hit White in the face. White tried to run, but Mr. Ken, Billy, and Leon caught him and “piled on him, beat him and kicked him repeatedly.” Mr. Ken then put his dog on White while they beat Private and another young man who tried to stop the fight. That night after the attack, White and Private packed their suitcases and snuck “out the back way” of the camp. On the highway, they found two white men who drove them to town. Like Brinson and Legget, many workers who escaped the violent armed guards at the isolated Camp Happy sought citizen leaders in the “Negro Quarters” in Naples who would listen to their stories and perhaps help them.²⁸³

Once White and Private reached Naples, where they reported the incident to several people in “The Quarters,” including John Salters, who convinced them to notify the police. They called the Chief Deputy Sheriff, Aubrey Rogers, who explained to White that “he could not do anything unless White was willing to take a warrant against whoever had beaten him.” In the rural South, such an accusation left White exposed to potential violent retribution. Sheriff Rogers took White to the local hospital where he was admitted. Agents Armstrong and St. Pierre interviewed a Mr. Joseph G. Bertolami, the Administrator at the Naples Community Hospital, who confirmed that the Hospital admitted White on February 14th at 1:00 a.m. and treated him for “multiple contusions, abrasions, and lacerations on his face, a fractured nose and left mandible.” Management and the foremen at Camp Happy as well as local sheriffs contended that Bobby White’s case characterized the only real problem, which was that violence inside

²⁸³ Ibid.

Camp Happy largely stemmed from the foremen's attempt to maintain order among their workers.

Local law enforcement officials and foremen at Camp Happy reported that no involuntary servitude occurred inside the farm outside Naples. They stated that although violence did occur inside the Immokalee Tomato Growers farm, it largely emerged out of conflict between drunk and disorderly workers of different races who came from various places in the South. They maintained that the ITGC ran one of the cleanest, best-managed camps in all of southern Florida and that they could prevent violence by improving communication between foremen and law enforcement officials. In reports to the FBI, local sheriffs and camp foremen expressed a set of commonly held notions in southern communities that "outside agitators" represented threats to the social order of their local community but that business and local law enforcement were fully capable of handling any social tensions without the interference of the federal government.²⁸⁴

This argument that black and white troublemakers disrupted camp life due to conflict over interracial housing bolstered the popular southern white narrative that racial integration threatened the social order. When Agents Armstrong and St. Pierre interviewed Hendry County Sheriff, Jack Branch, he reported that county law enforcement were unable to find any evidence that laborers were forced to remain at the farm or forced to work. Branch admitted that "a definite problem existed with respect to the labor camp in that both whites and Negroes who are generally uneducated and ignorant are housed together in barracks at the camp" and that "most of these laborers, both black and white, are from southern areas such as North Carolina, South Carolina,

²⁸⁴ Armstrong and St. Pierre in DOJ NA RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-18-120.

and Georgia.” In fact, the company supposedly attempted to mitigate any violence migrant workers might instigate in Naples. Sheriffs suggested that workers paid on Saturday tended to drink heavily and gamble, which led to “drunkenness and fights and it is apparently during the breaking up of such fights that arise as to mistreatment of the laborers by supervisory personnel.” In addition, the sheriff suggested that the reports of violence filtering into their office “indicated perhaps there has been some abuse on the part of ... several Negroe employees, among them Leon and Billy,” who held positions of authority in the camp, being expected to maintain order. But the agents’ report included the statement that the camp contained a juke joint and that “this was allowed so that laborers could make such purchases at the camp rather than going into town to do it.” This implies the double purpose of keeping workers from disturbing the peace of Naples and retaining them in the camp. The sheriff did report that the foreman, Ken Mulling, was likely guilty of abusing workers in the course of his duties as timekeeper on the farm, a statement widely confirmed by several accounts of workers inside Camp Happy.²⁸⁵

Jack Branch told Armstrong and Pierre that increased communication between the camp and his office could increase responsiveness to incidents of violence while reiterating the widely-held idea that racial ideologies of black male aggression and black female immorality contributed to disorder in the camp. In addition to arguing that drunken, gambling workers housed together led to conflict at Camp Happy, Branch suggested to Armstrong and St. Pierre that “unwed Negro girls who are allowed to live at the camp and who are promiscuous with laborers at the camp” led to fights among workers. “Fights over these women occur with frequency,” he declared. Ultimately,

²⁸⁵Ibid.

Branch reassured the FBI agents that “his investigation failed to show that the laborers could not leave the camp at any time they desired or that any force was used to keep them at the camp or to make them work.” However, further testimony from multiple witnesses inside the camp reveal that local law enforcement officials such as Jack Branch facilitated—and sometimes directly engaged in—acts of abuse, corruption, and peonage carried out by foremen at Camp Happy.²⁸⁶

The Chief Deputy of Collier County, Florida, Aubrey Rogers, testified to the FBI that although the Immokalee Tomato Growers camp was a “progressive” farm labor camp, violence increased in the winter of 1965 due the camp's isolation and workers he called “trouble makers.” He emphasized the camp’s spatial character as evidence of its advanced condition. Rogers stated that the camp was isolated several miles from the town of Naples in an “unincorporated area” off of state highway 31. But he described conveniences of the camp, stating “the camp consists of barracks-type accommodations for single farm laborers, small cottages for couples, and single women, as well as a combination dining hall and recreation room, and a commissary.” He informed the agents that the buildings inside the camp were “of modern design and metal construction.” In addition to providing hot and cold running water, the company put in “washing facilities and modern sewage facilities.” Though Rogers sought to portray Camp Happy as a progressive farm in its attempts at physical and social organization, he suggested that violence arose out of conflict among workers.²⁸⁷

Like Jack Branch, Rogers put forward racial integration as both a sign of Camp Happy’s social advancement and a source of conflict among workers. He informed the

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Aubrey Rogers Affidavit in DOJ NA RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-18-120.

FBI agents that the camp was the “first completely integrated farm labor camp” and “the most progressive” in the entire Southeastern United States. The company employed approximately five hundred farm laborers, including “Negroes, Whites, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Cubans, and Indians.” Rogers asserted it was his understanding that workers were not required to reside in the modern camp facilities, but if they did so, they were “expected to comply with camp regulations and pay for their accommodations ... in accordance with their agreement with the company.” He asserted that the camp “is set up to the best of the owners’ ability to minimize the problems such a camp brings to the community” and that he had “received no complaints that any of the workers were made to work in the fields without their full approval and consent.” However, Rogers also testified that recently “more fights at the ITGC have increased to the point where it is a definite problem.” He told agents Armstrong and St. Pierre that “through his own inquiries he had ascertained that ... troublemakers among the laborers included: Vera Mae Gadson, Leonard Spann, and Leroy Lynch.” None of these individuals appear in the FBI reports or affidavits included in the file. Furthermore, the testimony of several other workers and statements made by the FBI agents themselves convey the actuality that violence inside the camps stemmed from abusive foremen’s attempts to steal workers wages.²⁸⁸

In February 1965, FBI agents Sydney J. Prescott and Rolland J. McFarland interviewed Nathaniel Pearson, a 19 year-old male who worked at Camp Happy. Pearson’s testimony reveals the interconnection between isolated rural labor spaces and foremen’s abusive exploitation of workers. Pearson lived in Florence, South Carolina,

²⁸⁸ Ibid; For more on foreign immigrant workers see: Stephen H. Sosnick, *Hired Hands: Seasonal Farm Workers in the United States*, (Santa Barbara: McNally & Loftin, West, 1978); Griffith, David. *American Guestworkers: Jamaicans and Mexicans in the U.S. Labor Market* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

and like Brunson and Leggett, learned of the job through the South Carolina Unemployment Office. Pearson reported, “Mr. Freddie came to my house on Lawson St. and asked me if I wanted to go to Florida and work on a tomato farm.” Pearson recalled that the recruiter, Mr. Freddie, also convinced William Blanks, Nathan Jackson, and Charles “Junior” Atlas to sign up for the job, promising them free transportation. “Mr. Freddie told us it would not cost us anything.” Two days later the men along with twenty-five others boarded a school bus and left Florence for Camp Happy. Pearson recognized the bus driver as Clyde Barnes, “a white man from Pamplico, South Carolina.” After traveling for three days, Pearson and the others arrived at the camp on Friday around 2 p.m. He stated they “were taken to the camp office nearly three miles inside the camp.” At the office, a woman gave each worker a blanket, 2 towels, and 1 sheet and informed them \$6.00 would be deducted from their pay for the linens. Foremen then directed the workers to a large building inside the camp containing “about 100 double cots or bunk beds.” Like Brunson and Leggett, Pearson realized almost immediately upon entering the camp that the isolated camp, exploitative fees, and crowded living conditions put him in a dangerous situation.²⁸⁹

Pearson and his fellow workers now realized they were being exploited and immediately sought to leave the camp. They soon discovered that camp foremen committed wage theft and physical violence against workers. “One colored boy who joined us at Statesboro, Georgia got homesick and told a foreman named Jack that he was leaving.” The foremen said he could not leave or else he would owe them ten dollars to pay for his transportation to the camp. Later that night, Pearson witnessed foremen

²⁸⁹ Nathan Pearson Affidavit in DOJ NA RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-18-120.

attacking workers within the crowded barracks. A man who Pearson described as “an elderly white man” became drunk and continued swearing and disturbing workers who were trying to sleep. “A colored guard named Billy came into the building and told the white man to stop cussing and making noise.” Billy then left the barracks only to return with two other “colored men” who Pearson said were “more or less guards or supervisors at the camp.” The men attacked the elderly worker with a stick, kicking and hitting him about the head and back. They then took him to a wire enclosure behind the dining hall and locked him up there. Regardless of local police suggestions that agitators and violence among workers dominated disputes within the camp, Pearson and others' testimony reveal local sheriffs' collusion and even participation in violence against workers.²⁹⁰

Pearson's testimony and FBI commentary in the archives reveal both police misrepresentation as well as nuanced vestiges of southern racial hierarchies. As in most peonage labor camps, both white and black guards abused workers regardless of their ethnicity. At Camp Happy, all the workers interviewed in the FBI file were black, though they widely reported the multi-ethnic character of labor and victims of abuse. However, Pearson and others nearly always refer to white men as "foremen" and black security as “supervisors” or “time keepers.” On the same night that the black guards beat and imprisoned the white worker, Pearson reported “a colored policeman, Billy, and two colored men, and a short fat white man” came into the barracks to search for knives or other weapons. The following Sunday night, Pearson witnessed Billy, two black guards, and the white foreman, Jack, dragging a black worker named Jimmy Rogers out of bed and beating him with sticks and a black jack. The foreman, “Jack ...

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

held a pistol on Jimmy while the other men beat him.” Pearson later added, “The short fat white man was also present but he did not beat Jimmy.” Pearson told the FBI he believed the guards beat Jimmy because he spoke to other workers who arrived about the exploitative conditions in camp. Soon after, several workers would leave the camp, eventually reporting the abuses of the foremen there to federal agents, acting as part of the wider southern freedom struggle to expose peonage labor regimes for subjecting humans to inhumane environmental and working conditions.²⁹¹

Foremen in Camp Happy, like guards inside peonage labor and convict lease camps across the south, used dogs to intimidate and terrorize workers who resisted force. They trained dogs to perform the job of enforcement, and workers testified to the violence carried out by foremen via their trusty sidekicks. But in at least one case, a dog performed its duties without being ordered by foremen to do so. Nathan Pearson told the FBI that on the Monday after he arrived in the camp, he witnessed “a police dog” chase down and attack a white worker who got drunk and began cursing and making noise. “This dog will chase anyone who runs and will catch and hold the individual until someone whistles.” The foreman, Jack Branch, “had been inside the building and did not know the dog had chased the man.” Branch heard the commotion and whistled, ordering the dog to release the worker just as Billy and the other black guards began beating the man with sticks and black jacks. Pearson reported that when Billy beat someone, he referred to the beating as “a blessing.”²⁹²

On the Tuesday after Pearson arrived in the camp, while working in the fields, one of the black guards, Randolph, said to Pearson that he and the others “were going

²⁹¹ Pearon Affidavit DOJ NA RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-18-120.

²⁹² Pearon Affidavit DOJ NA RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-18-120.

to 'get blessed' that night." Pearson told the FBI, "He did not give a reason." When Pearson arrived back in camp from the fields that evening, he and ten other workers, including William Blanks, Nathan Jackson, Junior Frazier, and Harold Parker, in a defiant act of labor protest, turned in their badges and blankets and sheets to the foreman, Jack Branch. Pearson reported, "Jack placed the items on his truck which was in the camp yard ... and told us to 'beat it.' We walked out of the camp gate and had gone a distance of almost fifty yards when I heard a pistol shot. I turned around and saw Jack pointing a pistol in our direction." Branch didn't speak to the workers, and they did not speak to him when they turned around and walked away from the camp.²⁹³

Migrant farm workers, and those at Camp Happy in particular, consisted of both men and women, and some of the worst violence committed by foremen was directed against women inside the camp. The exploitation of women's labor in the fields and their bodies as prostitutes in the camps represents the double abuse suffered by females inside peonage systems. Women also played a key role in the exposure of abuses inside Camp Happy. Annie Bell Bailey swore her testimony to FBI agents Armstrong and St. Pierre on February 16, 1965, stating that she began working at the Immokalee Tomato Growers Company farm outside Naples after Christmas of 1963 and reported that her husband drove one of the busses that transported migrant farm labor. "Three weeks ago I stayed off work because my hands hurt. I went in to town to take a boy to court who had been cut." Several men in the camp gave Bailey money to buy liquor for them in town, which she did; however, once she returned, a worker named Al Flemming took the liquor from her room. When Bailey confronted Flemming, his wife cussed at Bailey, who then grabbed Mrs. Flemming by the arm. Ken Mulling intervened in the scuffle,

²⁹³ Pearson Affidavit in DOJ NA RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-18-120.

hitting Bailey in the back, and then, as she testified, “he kicked me where I sit down.” Bailey left camp the next day due to heavy bleeding. Once in Naples, she saw a doctor at the hospital. Other workers testified that Bailey was pregnant at the time and that as a result of the beating, she lost the baby. However, Agents Armstrong and St. Pierre reported that Bailey “does not know whether she was pregnant or not.” Bailey testified that the bleeding continued to increase, and she stayed in the hospital for a week. Mulling and Branch both told Bailey they were only interested in the \$13.50 she supposedly owed them for that week’s housing, directly linking her particular assault and subsequent departure from the camp to their peonage scheme.²⁹⁴

Disputes between women and men in the camps often resulted from conflicts over prostitution, which foremen arranged as part of their siphoning of money from workers in the camp. Nathan Pearson reported that the same night the black police officer arrived in camp to search workers’ barracks for weapons, he and Billy and two other black guards left the barracks and went to a separate building that Pearson reported housed a “colored woman who is single.” Finding a man in the woman’s residence, an argument ensued, and suddenly “the policeman hit the woman on the head with a flash light and knocked her unconscious.” Agents Armstrong and St. Pierre reported that there were at least “5 camp girls working sex deals” inside Camp Happy. According to local law enforcement, such disputes, including the incident involving Annie Bailey, occurred as guards attempted to keep order or end conflicts between workers. However, the violence carried out against these women had everything to do with peonage schemes. The assault that Billy Parrish and the police committed against the woman in the barracks that night was not solely over the man who was in her cabin.

²⁹⁴ Annie Bell Bailey Affidavit in DOJ NA RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-18-120.

A worker named T.W. Byrd reported—and the F.B.I. included in their final report—that Mulling and Branch took 50% of the money workers paid the girls for sex. Thus, workers knew the guards regularly searched female workers' cabins at night and collected money for sexual transactions. Because of women such as Annie Bailey and men such as T.W. Byrd, FBI agents began to see that much of the violence committed against workers had less to do with maintaining order than with taking money from workers.²⁹⁵

As a result of the overwhelming evidence put forth by multiple workers inside Camp Happy, in April 1965, after four months of investigation, David L. Norman, the Department of Justice Southern Regional Chief reported, "I have reviewed this file and have concluded that violation of a federal statute has probably occurred." Norman added that after first investigating under the peonage statutes, "the camp is certainly run with a strong hand" and that "labor is transported there by the management ... the cost of transportation is deducted from their pay, and they are often told to remain long enough to repay [the] amount to the company." Workers who wanted to leave the camp before paying the cost of transportation were "told that they will be charged with obtaining money under false pretenses." Furthermore, Norman confirmed what F.B.I. agents inferred from local law enforcement, that "Immokalee Tomato Farm has allowed a supervisor who is a special deputy of the Collier county Sheriffs' Department to mistreat farm laborers." Norman confirmed workers' reports that "guards often carried guns, blackjacks and pistols." He also noted that "The special deputy, Mulling has a large dog which he uses to maintain discipline." Finally, Norman stated that supervisors "have undoubtedly engaged in excessive use of force against some of the workers on the

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

farm.” Since Mulling was the only special deputy, he alone acted “under color of law” but that others such as Billy Parris who acted violently were to be removed.²⁹⁶

The DOJ Regional Chief’s statement reflected the long held policy of federal authorities, who deferred to local southern law enforcement in cases of disputes over labor and civil rights. At the same time, Norman’s directions to the DOJ special agents represented a new level of action on the part of the federal government to investigate claims of civil rights abuses. Norman made several recommendations, stating that one Jim McCune “will go to the Southern District of Florida in April, 1965 to see the manager of the farm and the county Sheriff.” He stated that McCune should see whether Mulling and Parris still worked at the camp and emphasized that the DOJ would not bring any action against the farm now but that they “are going to keep in close touch the situation there” and that “the use of dogs, armed supervisors, and other tactics to coerce and intimidate workers cannot be tolerated.” Norman issued the caveat that although warrants should be issued for persons violating the law, arrests should be made “without the use of excessive force against such persons.” Such weak, and ultimately meaningless recommendations obviously reveal the indifference of Norman to the plight of workers inside the Naples camp.

Agents St. Pierre and William D. Reagan interviewed Carl Glidden, President of Naples Fruit and Vegetable Co. on December 28, 1966, and he admitted that he operated the corporation, which had been named and which many still called the Immokalee Tomato Growers Company outside Naples, including Camp Happy, which he claimed was used “to accommodate farm laborers employed by his company who desire to use these facilities in accordance with the regulations his company set out.” He

²⁹⁶ Special Report of David L. Norman in DOJ NA RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-18-120.

swore no workers were required to use these facilities and pointed out that out of the roughly 600 or so workers he employed, only 150 or so stayed inside Camp Happy. Glidden explained that he used the state employment agencies to recruit workers who harvested his crops, many coming from within the southeast, particularly from South Carolina. He clearly stated that the information he provided state employment agents included the provision of free transportation plus meals while in transit. Glidden stated that so long as employees worked in the fields for five weeks, they would pay no cost; however, “in the event they fail to work the whole five weeks, the cost of the transportation will be prorated at a rate of \$2 per week.” This caveat hardly matched the rate charged to workers inside Camp Happy by foremen. Using a term directly linked to the slave plantations of the old South, Glidden told the F.B.I. that Jack Branch was the “labor overseer” at Camp Happy and that he was in charge of daily operations there. The records reveal it was foremen who largely organized the system of peonage inside the Naples Fruit and Vegetable Company farm and they who exercised violence against workers in order to intimidate them and purloin their wages.²⁹⁷

In the end, foremen utilized the isolation of Camp Happy to run their graft operation and molest workers who resisted. The FBI report includes a “List of Charges of Civil Rights Violations in Camp Happy,” submitted by one Freddie Commodore. The record does not indicate Commodore’s position or affiliation. Included in the list is a revealing series of statements, corroborated by the multiple workers’ affidavits taken in 1965. The document implicates Ken Mulling, the camp foreman and “Special Deputy” of the Collier County Sheriffs’ Department, and Jack Branch, the “Labor Overseer,” as well

²⁹⁷ Agents St. Pierre and William D. Reagan interview with Carl Glidden, DOJ NA RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-18-120.

as many camp guards for much of the wage theft, violence, and extortion committed against workers. The list includes the statement that “Jack Branch is an accomplished liar (hard to detect) [and] also has extreme sadistical [sic] tendencies frequently.” Branch apparently “lied about the Ken Mulling shooting” and himself “shot twice at Charles Montgomery.” In addition to shootings, the foremen and their guards carried out a host of offenses against workers to ensnare them in their system of peonage. The men took money from girls for prostituting themselves, enforcing the sex trade with physical violence. They split the transportation fees they charged workers, reporting nothing to the company. Branch and Billy Parrish apparently developed a “scheme to discredit time-keeper,” who represented a potential witness to their crimes. They sold wine and beer to workers, including minors. They attacked and beat a worker named William Hunter over the head with a revolver and ordered guards to beat up another “colored man” who’s “skull was fractured by a 2x4. A hospital bill for \$265.00 corroborated this incident. In addition to pimping girls inside the camp, Jack Branch regularly used the girls, having “sex relations with Arletta, who was afflicted with venereal disease [and] (left Naples area to obtain treatment.)”²⁹⁸

In a haunting though uncorroborated statement, Commodore’s list of charges against Branch and the foremen includes a reference to an incident that occurred inside the vast isolated space of the Naples Fruit and Vegetable Company farm. Suggesting the possibility of innumerable untold incidents in which men and women subject to employer violence disappeared, the report states that “Woman who drowned could have been saved J.B. wouldn’t let Red Cap go investigate.” The statement does not indicate

²⁹⁸ “List of Charges of Civil Rights Violations in Camp Happy” in DOJ NA RG 60, Class 50, Box 10800, File 50-18-120.

how or why the woman may have drowned, but the suggestion that J.B., likely Jack Branch, kept Red Cap from investigating the death, conveys at best his gross negligence for workers' safety and at worst his personal involvement in the drowning death. In rural industrial labor spaces throughout the South, beyond the prosecutorial power of law enforcement, employers and foremen abused and sometimes murdered workers in the process of exploiting their labor.²⁹⁹

On January 30, 1967, Frank M. Dunbaugh, the Acting Chief of the Department of Justice Southeastern Section, officially closed the case of Camp Happy. After two years of investigations and files that directly implicated the employees of the Naples Fruit and Vegetable Company, one of whom was also a Special Deputy for the Collier County Sheriffs' Department, the file states, "FBI investigation failed to disclose facts indicating a violation of federal statutory law." It goes on to say, "The specific allegations made by complainants, i.e. overcharging in the commissary, poor facilities, beatings, etc. are matters not covered by existing statutes" and that "Complainants could not support with specifics their charge that workers were not free to leave, and FBI discovered nothing to support this charge." Though the charge of "involuntary servitude or slavery," as the file indicates, could not be adjudicated because workers were ultimately allowed to leave the camp, the overwhelming evidence indicates that within Camp Happy and perhaps many migrant labor camps in the region, the isolation of the landscapes and lack of oversight and political will by federal law enforcement left workers at the mercy of corrupt, violent employers who remanded and exploited their labor force against workers' will. The men and women in Florida's tomato fields

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

experienced inhumane treatment at the hands of violent bosses long after the upheavals and legal successes of the modern civil rights era.

As a result of the demographic shifts, social movements, and federal interventions of the mid twentieth century the majority of white and black southerners managed to avoid the worst forms of peonage labor, but increasingly undocumented immigrants working in the U.S. fell prey to the same abusive conditions. Due to economic expansion, the strength of labor unions, as well as federal legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the War on Poverty, Americans saw poverty rates reduced by roughly half and fair employment practices expanded. A growing number of Americans lived in modern homes, worked in comfortable offices, or urban factories. Market globalization allowed the U.S. to become a service and information economy while global competition for production and manufacturing pushed American companies overseas and pulled undocumented immigrants to America to pick our fruits and vegetables. The system of peonage labor that pervaded the South in the early 1900s remained in use, particularly in states like Florida, where ‘right to work’ laws undermined labor organization and where the federal government ignored the plight of non-citizen workers. However, workers and activists continued to resist employers who sought to ensnare them in debt through peonage wage theft and threat of violence.³⁰⁰

In a 2008 congressional hearing on the plight of migrant workers in Florida’s tomato fields, Lucas Benitez, a man who picked tomatoes in Immokalee, Florida testified regarding “abuses of Tomato workers.” Benitez stated,

The job of picking tomatoes is hard and heavy, dirty and dangerous. You run all day in the burning sun with a 32 pound bucket on your shoulder, carrying it from the rows where you are working to the truck where you dump it out and back. And this is when you aren’t stooped over to pick tomatoes. At the end of the day, the cramps don’t even allow you to sleep. Not only is

³⁰⁰ Jones, *Dispossessed*, (1992).

your body exhausted, but so is your spirit after having to put up with the yelling of your supervisors all day long.

Then in a statement that reveals the intricate and terrible nexus between isolated rural - industrial environments and peonage labor abuses, Benitez told the United States Congress:

I was working staking tomatoes, and I got ahead of the rest of the crew. When I stopped for a moment to catch my breath, the boss yelled at me, got down from his truck, and threatened to beat me up if I didn't continue to work immediately. I was alone in the middle of hundreds of acres of fields, miles from any town.

Benitez went on to say that women suffered an additional oppression enduring “an environment that is charged with sexual harassment,” [but that] “countless workers have suffered the humiliation of beatings, rape, and wage theft by their bosses.” In that brief statement, Benitez expressed what thousands of pages of documents in the U.S. National Archives Peonage files report: that regardless of federal laws—such as the 1867 Peonage Statute, The Alonzo Bailey decision in 1911, and the Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s—peonage labor systems, whereby workers are forced to work in terrible environmental and labor conditions through threat of indebtedness or violence, or both, remain in place in the United States in the 21st century. American cultural ideologies of economic opportunity, political and social independence, physical mobility, and above all individual freedom fail to provide for an economic, political, or social system to prevent the abuse of millions of Americans who suffer from varying schemes, most of them completely legal, by employers, banks, and corporations to exploit workers, ensnare people in cyclical debt, and even force laborers into involuntary servitude.

DOJ files related to the ITGC investigation reveal that the physical environment directly contributed to tomato growers' anxiety, desperation, and brutality toward migrant farm workers. The resilience of workers like Brinson and Legget and the

assistance they received from local black leaders such as Willa Lee Pruitt and John Salters represent a prime example of the mass resistance phase of the Modern Civil Rights Movement where average citizens across the U.S. challenged the inequality and mistreatment they experienced. Foremen, Sheriffs, and Owners blamed workers and “agitators” for the violence inside the camp in an attempt to cover up their peonage scheme and the larger structural barriers to worker safety. The particular instances of violence at Camp Happy clearly occurred as a result of the isolation of workers and the collusion of labor foremen, local police, and company owners. Without access to legal protection, workers remained subject to poor working conditions, wage theft, and physical violence, even death. Though after the economic expansion of the 1960s and federal protection for civil rights, southern black and white workers increasingly avoided the type of debt peonage they endured inside Camp Happy. However, undocumented immigrants continued to face peonage labor regimes and physical violence in rural industrial labor camps throughout the twentieth century and beyond.

Conclusion:

Workers subjected to peonage labor regimes throughout the rural industrial South confronted a complex and dangerous set of forces that compromised their bodies, siphoned their wages, and remanded them to the fringes of society. The Progressive notion that man could manage and transform nature to maximize profits drove industrialists to design vast industrial operations requiring enormous engines of labor. The economic ideologies of wage labor precipitated a race to the bottom in which the lowest possible, not even subsistence-level, wages that could still draw men and women to the factory or job site became the norm. Racialist ideologies informed the belief of industrialists that southern and eastern Europeans and African Americans made more suitable candidates for certain types of labor, especially in warm climates. Lax state governments and pro-business politicians legislated immigration policies that attracted workers from abroad, and the desperation of marginalized immigrants worsened wage deflation. Whether from Italy, Hungary, New York, Florida, or Georgia, male and female workers found themselves drawn into networks of peonage labor throughout the South in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ultimately, workers' vulnerability to employers and foremen made them victims. The difficulty of leaving remote work camps and the relative inability of local police, social justice reformers, or federal agents to protect workers left them to suffer the environmental exposure, poverty, and violence that characterized their daily lives.

Peonage workers faced exploitation on train cars and boats or trapped in secluded islands, forests, and fields. Misled by malicious labor agencies, workers were interred at the hands of sadistic guards and bosses who physically abused them and

withheld their wages. Nearly all of the workers examined in this study described their suffering in terms of their exposure to the physical environment and violence inside rural labor camps. The muckraker journalists and Department of Justice investigators who deposed workers indicated that their oppression was partly a consequence of the natural environment where the camps were located. However, while workers repeatedly complained about being forced to labor under the lash inside a desolate wilderness, peonage labor camps were anything but natural. They were and continue to be products of the political, cultural, and economic imperatives of a modern private-public corporate labor system which devalues workers rights, co-opts local law enforcement, handcuffs the federal government through deregulation, and shields unethical and often illegal practices from the view and legal reach of society. Employers and workers did not envision or engage with pristine, untouched wilderness, nor did they seek some ecologically sustainable system of human use of nature. Rather they saw the forests and swamps as places unfit for humans. According to lumbermen, only the construction of railroads, lumber mills, housing and stores could make the Alabama forest “the very center of civilization.” For workers, the lack of decent housing, edible food, safe labor regimes, and fair pay made the countryside a deplorable place to live and work. So, the story of violence in rural industrial peonage labor camps is one of both human and non-human nature. Workers were not solely trapped by the woods and the sea but by the balance book, the lash, and the gun.

Workers who originally sought opportunity in the woods and bogs across the South met peonage regimes with resilient hearts and shrewd intelligence. They forged cultures of cooperative resistance, running away, reporting abuses, and testifying to federal authorities in the hopes of overturning the systems of abuse and inequality they

met. Those who could not escape, exorcised their suffering however they could, through drinking and gambling, singing and dancing, foraging and fighting. And though many workers subjected to peonage schemes managed to escape or eventually find more advantageous employment elsewhere, their narratives of hard labor, indebtedness, and violence continue to ring through popular music, film, and fashion as a constant reminder that the cultural landscape of the South remains bound to the collective memory of workers who toiled in the fields and forests.

The fluidity of peonage conditions meant that workers were not always peons, guards could also be workers, and peonage camps were porous, even when the environment particularly lent itself to restraining human mobility. Peonage itself was and is difficult to detect, and its official existence is hard to prove. Peonage regimes often operated under the racial ideologies of ethnic European inferiority or black shiftlessness and indolence, but such regimes also appeared at times to be part of some actors' pragmatic self-interest, rooted deeply in a workers' self proclaimed identity as southern woodsmen. Peonage could be the result greedy employers, corrupt bosses, or tightly woven into one's personal identity as an environmental conservationist. Carl Glideen, the president of Naples Fruit and Vegetable Company even seemed to suggest peonage could result from the best intentions of a social progressive. However thin employers' defenses may appear to opponents of peonage, the slippery nature of peons' status reappears throughout the multiple case studies in this period.

Thanks to Alexander Irvine's reporting, we know that ideas about human and non-human nature within peonage labor camps also shifted. Pastoral landscapes could be enticing to unemployed immigrants from rural European hinterlands only to eventually become foreboding symbols of their vulnerability. Men could be treated like

dogs; foremen could be as coarse as trees, or as vicious as bulls. Animals could be workers, guards, and companions. The same swamps that the Langdales loved and identified as the source of their success bred bark beetles, typhoid, and fire that threatened their profits and livelihood. Though physical environments never entirely determine human behavior, humans experience their lives and express their interests within the context of their physical surroundings, particularly through labor. The peonage labor disputes in this study emerged across the twentieth century South as social and environmental constructs changed from one of frontier opportunity to industrial contract labor and again to manufacturing and service economy paradigms. With these changes, the violence and oppression associated with peonage labor camps became more visible and less prevalent for southern workers.

Throughout the twentieth century, peonage labor regimes evolved, as did the global economic, political, and social forces they remained bound to. The larger shift from an extractive industrial economy to a manufacturing and service economy reduced the scope of rural-industrial operations. As Standard Oil made space for General Electric and General Motors, employers sought organized, efficient, and educated labor to carry out technically proven methods that produced higher quality and more sophisticated goods. American businessmen increasingly extracted natural resources from overseas where lower labor costs and nearly non-existent environmental standards attracted their shareholders' opportunistic vision. In urban economies, workers could leave one job for another or start their own businesses as people increasingly did in the service economy of the later twentieth century.

Demographic shifts also contributed to the slow decline of rural industrial labor systems. Drawn by the economic expansions surrounding the first and second world

wars, millions of poor black and white southerners migrated from the turpentine camps and tomato fields to urban areas in the South and North, where work in factories, offices, or shops allowed wider choice, greater competition among businesses, and more fluidity of economic opportunity. Unionization and federal oversight increased profits, and in many work sites employment, hours, and wages were systematically documented to ensure legal transparency for employers and workers alike. Even in small towns, connection to cities through increasingly available transportation and communication made illegal exploitation of workers less feasible. As Americans embraced the economic growth of the post-war era, peonage labor became less frequent and easier to expose.

Another significant change came with the rise of the regulatory, semi-welfare, and civil rights states between 1900 and 1965. An increasingly powerful federal government aided by an increasingly educated society demanded business and local government make certain concessions for the regulation of the economy, the creation of a social safety net, and the protection of minorities' civil rights. After World War Two and through the 1960s, poverty seemed to be on a steady decline, and education and professional occupations increased in the U.S. and the South. Though old anti-state and racial ideologies remained widespread, most Americans found ways to avoid peonage, and they had a federal government and civil rights organizations such as the Southern Poverty Law Center to support them if they were victimized.

The increasing prevalence of technology and media had a significant impact on the evolving nature of peonage labor in the southern U.S. Telephones, radios, and automotive travel informed workers of opportunities in other places and made it easier for them to leave an exploitative boss. Muckraker journalists such as Alexander Irvine and socially conscious television news hosts like Edward R. Murrow exposed the plight

of peonage labor to an increasingly socially conscious population. If racial, gender, and economic equality remained illusive realities, most Americans recognized their agency as consumers in using the commercial buying power higher wages afforded them. This created a national popular culture based on the consumption of goods and media that offered unprecedented opportunities to the working class.

Peonage is not a static socio-economic status or an outmoded form of slave labor. Rather, it is a fluid set of social and environmental relationships directly linked to modern market imperatives that persistently evade legal and social justice. In fact, much of the litigious failure of Gilded Age progressive reformers came from their inability to prove that workers were somehow subjected to forced labor for any significant period of time. Coercive labor regimes and indebtedness did not begin with American slavery or start anew with southern Redemption. Nor did it end with the 1867 Peonage Act, the 13th Amendment, or the 1965 Civil Rights Act. New government oversight, the mechanization of agriculture, and outward social migration did not put an end to peonage labor. Rather, different social groups fell into and climbed out of peonage as market expansion, federal regulation, and social activism changed the way Southerners lived and worked. At its core, peonage is about labor, debt and violence, which often remain invisible to the human eye and the collective national conscience until exposed by legal justice, media attention, or social action. It is clear that twentieth century coercive labor regimes, enforced either through debt or violence, were heavily concentrated in rural isolated spaces, particularly in the South. However, indebtedness, poverty, and violence also shift over time, and are continually entangled in changing constructs of space, visibility, and access to legal protection.

As more Americans work in urban domesticated spaces that are visible to the technological advances of smart phone cameras and social media, the form of peonage labor that ensnared people such as Mike Trudics and Alonzo Bailey are no longer wide spread. Rather, the invisibility that Mexican and Central American immigrants experience in the fields of California and Pennsylvania, or the young women of India find inside brothels, and the child soldiers of African nations meet within armed militias makes them the victims of twenty-first century peonage. When debt and liquidity are clouded in speculative investment derivatives, even upper middle class American professionals can see their retirement savings and their real estate assets disappear overnight, only to resurface on the balance sheets of banking executives' private personal portfolios. So, increasingly, the violence associated with labor and debt are not the traditional forms of physical confrontation seen between bosses and workers in the forests and fields of the South. However, labor, debt, and violence remain linked to social and environmental constructs.

When Mary Quackenbos wrote that "The cruelties and licenses practiced ... are not easy to get at unless detectives could spend many weeks in those camps and subject themselves to the dangers," she spoke to the isolated forests and swamps that imprisoned workers and concealed foremen's abuses. The same holds true today. Whether through legal intervention or media exposure, peonage can only be addressed once we locate it, put ourselves in a position to understand it, and raise the suffering of victims to the attention of society and government. Sadly, as long as humans accept opportunistic mythologies that portray market expansion and technological advancement as sufficient substitutes for human rights and social justice, the battle over labor, debt, and violence on Planet Earth will continue.

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