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Laurel's past rooted in turpentine era

Sam McKeithan camp workers were "like one big family."

RODNEY CROUTHER

Published 2:31 a.m. ET July 8, 2002 | **Updated 12:00 a.m. ET July 8, 2002**

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LAUREL -- Ruby Sims is a living link to an era when Southwest Florida made a slow and steady fortune out of its vast pinewoods.

Sims was 3 years old when her family moved from Crystal River in 1921 to work in Sam McKeithan's turpentine camp, at what is now Laurel.

The McKeithan camp housed about 500 residents, nearly all black. Many were drawn to Florida because the state's booming turpentine industry was one of the few in the south that employed large numbers of black people.

During the heyday of the industry, roughly from the mid-19th century through the 1930s, there were at least six camps in this region, from Manatee County to Bee Ridge in eastern Sarasota County, to South Venice, El Jobean and Punta Gorda.

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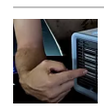
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Sims' father was a "stiller," meaning that he spent long, hot days -- summer was turpentining's peak season -- stationed over a copper still, cooking 500 gallons of pine gum at a time into turpentine and the by-product rosin.

For almost a century, Florida and Georgia led the nation in the production of these two products, both used in making paints, varnishes, disinfectants and medicines.

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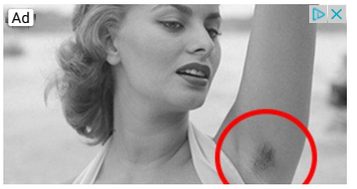

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According to census figures, more than 17,000 people worked in Florida's turpentine industry in 1910, 65 percent of the national total. At that time, Florida produced slightly more than half of all the turpentine stilled in America, according to Robert S. Blout's book "Spirits of Turpentine," which documents the industry from its beginnings with the Spanish explorers in the 16th century.

Turpentining was hot, tedious and grueling work. Under the watchful eyes of "woodsriders," crews combed the pine-fringed swamps to slash "cat faces" into pine-tree bark, V-shaped grooves from which pine gum oozed into clay pots or metal pans. A slow worker might catch a lash from the woodsrider's whip.

Gum collection, in buckets weighing up to 50 pounds each, was done from before dawn until after dark.

The pay was barely enough to sustain a family; most had to improvise ways to supplement their day-to-day needs.

"They were getting paid about 35 cents a day," said Sims, who is the mother of Sandra Terry, director of the Laurel Civic Association. "At the end of that month, that 35 cents didn't go very far. I wore a lot of flour sack dresses."

Many companies paid workers with "company money," aluminum coins issued by the company for use primarily at the commissary stores within the camps.

"If you went into town with company money, you were at the mercy of the individual merchants to decide how much your money was worth," said Bruce Piatek, executive director of the Florida Agriculture Museum in Palm Coast.

Until 1924, the state leased convicts as laborers for many turpentine camps, including those in South Venice and Punta Gorda. Reports of rampant abuse and poor living conditions for convicts at turpentine camps was one of the primary reasons that state leaders finally abolished the practice, more than 10 years after other southern states had done so.

In contrast to the harshest stories, however, life in Laurel's McKeithan camp was relatively peaceful. Sims recalled Sam McKeithan himself as a friendly, pleasant man who lived at the edge of the camp, which included a church, Mount Zion Baptist, and a school for the children of the workers.

"Things weren't that bad. No one paid us much, but nobody paid anyone in those days," said Sims, who said the roots of many of the families in present-day Laurel can be traced back to the operation of the camp. "There were a lot of good people here. Really, it was like one big family."

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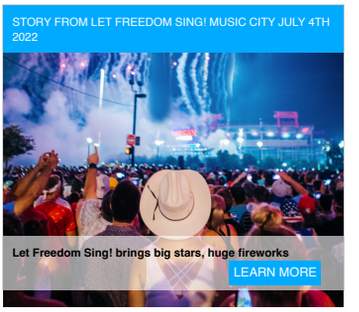

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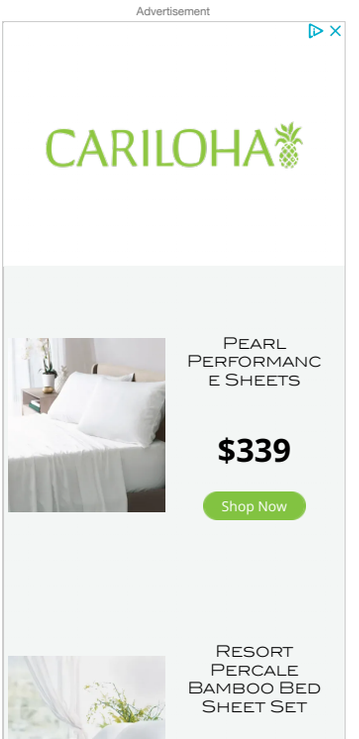

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By the 1940s, more efficient mechanical means had been devised for collecting pine gum. Turpentine itself became less commonly used in paint products. Clear-cutting destroyed acres of pine forests on land that development made too valuable for continued use in turpentining.

The end of the industry, in some ways fragmented the close community that developed around the turpentine still in Laurel as members of the community began leaving the area in search of new employment.

Those who stayed, supported a handful of black-owned and operated businesses, including two stores and a nightclub, that survived for several more decades.

Material from the Florida Agriculture Museum and the Venice City Archives was used in this report.

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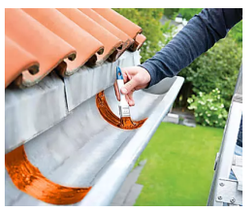

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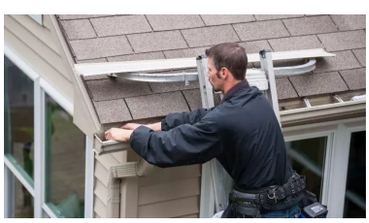

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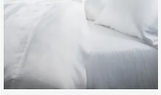

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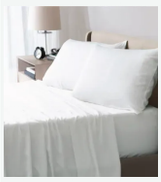

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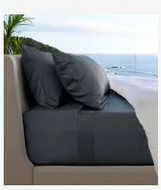

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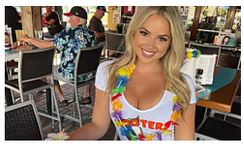

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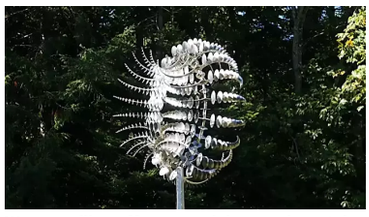

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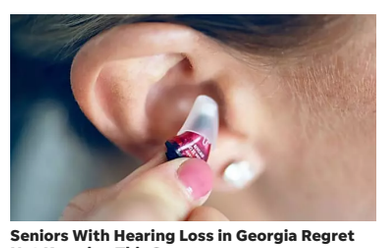

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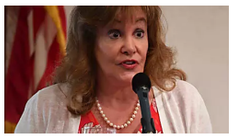

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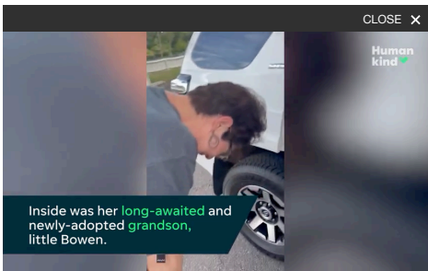

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