

## [Jim Lewis, Turpentine Worker]

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Jim Lewis Padgett's Switch, Mobile, Ala.

JIM LEWIS, TURPENTINE WORKER.

Written by Helen S. Hartley

While driving on Highway 90 and nearing Padgett's Switch, which is located just sixteen miles south of Mobile; and called so, for in the past Padgett's Switch was a flag station on the Railroad. I suddenly discerned in the distance across the fields a negro man pouring turpentine into a barrel. Leaving the par on the Highway, I proceeded to cross the fields, but found it a hard matter because the ground was thickly covered with underbrush, and together with briars and the dampness (for it had just rained a few minutes before) made walking rather unpleasant.

When I had finally gotten close to the darkey he had finished the pine tree he was working on and was slowly moving a small barrel to another tree. He greeted me with a rather surprised expression upon his face and with "Goodmorning, Mum," waited for me to speak. He was a tall man, slightly stooped, although he is only thirty-eight years of age. He spoke

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quickly in the true Negro dialect and often showed a good set of teeth in a friendly smile. When asked what his name was his reply came quickly:

“Jim Lewis, Mum,” and then he stated that he lived back in the woods, and at the same time pointed toward the south. He continued:

“I got de bestest wife an' fou' chilluns, an' de three of dese are all young 'uns an' have tuh go tuh school an' de older one gits work 2 on de farms here 'bout, but makes powerful little money, as de white folks 'round here are all po' and can't pay nobody nothin' no mo'.

Answering my question as to his health and the health of his family, Lewis said:

“Thank God, I got mah health. 'Fore God health is de bestest thing in dis world, I jest wouldn't take anythin' for mah health. No Mum mah family dey ain't sick neither.”

Lewis also said, “Where I'se came f'm jest north of Mobile, I used to git a dollar and a quarter a day workin' as a yard man in de stills, but as I'm livin' 'round here now ah hires out to what eber job I can git, sometimes hits chippin', dippin' or haulin', I tries to tuh make 'bout a dollar and a half a day, but some days I sure do hafter hurry to tuh git that much, but I sure enough needs all de money I'se can git a-hold of to tuh git along on.”

When asked if /he was a church going man, his answer came quickly:

“I was raised up a God fearin' man, but don't git me wrong lady, 'cause I don't 'zackly goes 'round praying like my old woman an' makin' a show of myself by getting down on my knees, but I sure tries to tuh do right by de Lawd, 'cause hit sure looks like de debil got the whip hand over the world.”

As Lewis was talking, he hesitated and slowly looked around, then 3 suddenly he exclaimed:

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“My God, I do declare, look at dat” and without moving I looked on the ground and saw as large a moccasin as I have ever seen, slowly crawling along just a little to the south of where I was standing. Lewis picking up a good size limb, which was lying on the ground he began to strike at the snake. His hair becoming damp clung to his head from perspiration, the sparkling of his eyes and the force of his breath was like whistling /through his teeth, showed the exertion he was under while killing the moccasin. When the snake was killed, Lewis straightened up, and said:

“Well, dat ain't right, here us is, two grown-up people quiet-like talkin' an' that thing comes along. You know I was downright skeered for a minute 'cause he was sure close to tuh you, lady.”

When Lewis quieted down I asked him about the turpentine business, he told me that rosin was a gum that is obtained from the pine tree, by chipping at the base of the tree and if “a fellow's a old hand at turpentin'.” he knows the cut should not exceed one-third the diameter of the tree at any point, and additional “streaks” are chipped higher and higher and the sap then drains into the “cup” which is at the base of the tree. The “cup” is made of galvanized iron, zinc, or aluminum. I noticed that all the trees in the immediate section we were standing in had only one “cup”, but Lewis said that trees up to fourteen inches in diameter generally has two cups, while on larger trees three cups are frequently used. The gum or resin in these cups are “dipped” or collected at regular intervals and hauled to the stills, and Louis' job at the present time is dipping.

Lewis would not tell me where the still was situated, for when asked he just answered:

“When I'se through fillin' this-one I jest leaves hit along de road a piece and the other fellow gits hit.”

Seeing that my visit was interrupting the negroes work, I left him with the question unanswered.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY: Personal interview and experiences.