

**Oral History Interview**

**Herbert L. Kayton**

with

Roy R. White

(10/7/59)

This interview is the property of the Forest History Society and may not be used or quoted for publication without the permission of the Society.

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Mr. Herbert L. Kayton

October 7, 1959  
Savannah, Georgia

**White:** When was an interest in forestry first apparent in Georgia?

**Kayton:** The first interest in forestry in this state in which I was a part began in 1922. And it began at the instigation of private interests rather than the state. The principle concern was with forest fires at that time. Farmers, cattlemen, and any others who had, or thought they had, a purpose to serve would set fire to the woods and the resulting damage was great. Cattlemen believed firing the woods periodically would make the forage for their cattle much better. Another belief was that the boll weevil thrived in the wooded areas that surrounded the cotton fields. Those who had this belief considered it a necessity to fire the woods to protect their crops. As a consequence there were no restrictions on setting fires and no organization to check fires once started. In 1922 under the leadership of Mr. Bonnel Stone an organization was formed with the objective of prevailing on the Georgia legislature to pass laws restricting the firing of woods. For three years we labored to secure passage of some kind of measure that would limit the setting of fires and require notice of intention to burn an area. We were successful in securing a law. It was not the law, however, that finally secured protection against damaging fire. It was a process of education of those who had to lose by the fires. The organization headed by Mr. Stone was made up of those who had an interest in the woods: farmers, lumbermen, businessmen and factors. A few years afterwards the state organized a forestry department. It was something that had to be done by local people. During the time we were pressing for legislation we were told that if the matter were handled by Georgians some success was possible, but defeat was sure if "those 'bolsheviks' from Asheville and Washington tried to interfere."

**White:** At what time was this association begun?

**Kayton:** In 1922. We had the bill passed in 1925. In the organization were several landowners, several farmers, several turpentine men, and two of us from Savannah; one was an exporter and I was a factor. I think there were about 20 or 25. They came from all over the state. I can't remember many of those who were up there. All of them have passed away now. I think I am the sole survivor of that organization.

**White:** Did this association help finance some government workers such as Miss Gerry and Dr. Cary?

**Kayton:** No, they were government workers.

**White:** Did any factor, or group of factor, help with expenses for them to bring their information to the operators?

**Kayton:** No, our job was to get that forestry bill passed. We went up to

Atlanta at our own expense just as the others did and stayed there while the legislature was in session. We spoke before different committees. And it took us three years of that work before we finally got it through. Of course we wrote letters in the meanwhile to different people trying to get their aid and assistance. It cost us a little money but not very much. The thing that started forestry of course was that after the association had been working for 2 or 3 years and was commencing to make headway then the state appointed a forestry commission. And they made appropriations to it. Then of course whenever the forestry commission advised they could pass laws and they could get money and do things that we couldn't do. We could discuss matters with the members of the commission and of course we had an influence with them and I think we helped during the years that followed. Today the pulp industries have purchased thousands and thousands of acres. I understand the Union Bag of Savannah controls or leases a million acres of land and any land they acquire or get possession of, they keep the fire off, they thin out the worthless trees, they have their own seed beds and plant seedlings where they are needed. And that has developed the whole state of Georgia because there are 2 such mills in Brunswick, there are 2 in Savannah, and there is one at least at St. Mary's. That's 5 I know if in Georgia and I think there may be several small ones up in the center of the state. They make kraft papers and the side products and they take care of their lands and they are building them up. I understand Union Bag cuts no wood off its own land as long as they can buy it. What they can't buy they cut from their lands. But they do take out the worthless trees and use them. And of course they take out some of the hardwoods too where they are developing forest lands. And I understand the slash pine has almost entirely taken the place of the longleaf. You find very little growth, and most of those are original growth or regrowth that voluntarily came up, of longleaf pines.

**White:** The association then made the state conscious of a definite interest in forest controls?

**Kayton:** It aroused the interest. That's what we intended. It was very effective. I don't believe the Georgia Forestry Commission would have been formed as early as it did if it wasn't for the Georgia Forest Association. But it would eventually have come, I am sure. Because after Dr. Herty, with his little experimental plant here in Savannah, the Herty Laboratory, found they could produce paper from pinewood, which before that was virtually impossible, the mills from the North commenced coming down here and buying up pine lands. Up to that time the mills were all located in New England and Canada. But these mills in Georgia, Florida, Alabama, and Louisiana have all come in since Dr. Herty's day.

**White:** Was the federal government somewhat inadequate to put any ideas across down here? Was there resentment?

**Kayton:** No, I wouldn't say that. They primed us. They primed the Forestry Association. But we did ask them to stay away from Atlanta while the Legislature was in session because some of these boys up there objected to "foreigners" coming in to the state and telling us what we should do. They felt they knew better what to do than anybody from Washington. Of course they were wrong but that was

the attitude of the South.

**White:** Dr. Cary worked at the level of the operators. He seldom if ever contacted anyone on the level of the legislature, did he?

**Kayton:** No, he did not attempt that. The men who came to Atlanta to talk with the legislature were mostly from Asheville, and some men from Washington. But Dr. Cary - his work was in the woods. He tried to show these operators that burning of woods was doing a damage and that they should stop burning them. The feeling there was that if they didn't burn it somebody else would intentionally.

**White:** In your opinion which approach was the most successful: that at the level of the operators or the approach from higher up, such as the law against burning the woods?

**Kayton:** Well, I think that Dr. Cary was trying to promulgate the ideas of the United States Forestry Department or Service. And of course he had practical knowledge of forestry because he had been in Europe and he had seen forestry practiced in some of the larger countries of Europe. He knew forestry from actual experience. Miss Gerry of course knew it from the microscopic end of it and her knowledge of wood and what woods could do. I'm not reflecting in any way upon the U. S. Forestry Service. They sent out pamphlets that were most valuable and most educational. I think it was a combination of all with one object in view. That was to protect the forests and give them a chance. I think that not only thinning, up to that time there seemed to be an idea in the South that the pine tree could not be transplanted - that was quickly eradicated and as soon as seed planting was established the demand for seedlings grew continually. It started on a small scale. I remember just the one seed bed down in Albany, Georgia, which was superintended by a man by the name of Storey, and it was amazing the demand that came in for those seedlings after a year or two when someone would plant them and they would start growing. I can show you here in Savannah where thousands of seedlings have been planted around in new sub-divisions which was something unheard of before because we had no pine trees in the city.

**White:** Did you make the trip to France in either 1924 or 1925 with the commission of turpentine men?

**Kayton:** No, I did not. I think Fowler went, and Sessoms went, Dr. Herty, and I've forgotten the commission entirely. I remember Dr. Herty came back from France with the cup system and he developed the cup system we are using now which of course, as I say, was a definite improvement. Today you can't find a turpentine still any more like there were in the olden days. The sale of crude gum, instead of separating the resin and turpentine, has increased so tremendously that it doesn't pay a turpentine farmer to erect a still. They don't produce in the quantities they used to. So they prefer to sell the crude gum without buying barrels, staves, hoop irons, and mules and all the things that were necessary to have around the still.

**White:** Then there isn't a place for the factor in the business today?

**Kayton:** The factoring business is a thing of the past.

**White:** Even in the time it was flourishing it was a rather risky business wasn't it? Weren't you subject to more than normal fluctuations in demand and etc.?

**Kayton:** We usually protected ourselves by taking transfer of leases or mortgages on the land and the animals and the equipment around the stills. While we had losses occasionally we usually made money in the business. It was a profitable business. But it just appears one of these things with the changing times. You see, in the olden days a turpentine operator would collect his crop and when the gum first started to run it had a very short distance from the scarified surface down to the cup. But it probably was scarified, a little wood was cut off, about 30 times a year, once a week during the rainy season. The crude gum had to run from the scarified point down into the cup and that distance lengthened with each scarification of the tree. As the gum ran down the tree it picked up dust and dirt and became discolored. The first year a man with a box or a cup would make the fine light water-white resin. And it gradually, as the year went on, it became window-glass which was the next grade. And then M and N and K and I and down to the B resin which was the black resin. They didn't know why. They just thought the tree ran darker resin. But when the cup system came on they raised the cup each year to place it directly under the scarified point and then they would get fine resin again, until the tree got scarified up another foot or two again and then the gum running down the face of the tree would pick up the dirt and become discolored. When the first large stills came in they found they could wash the crude gum with acids and detergents and when they ran it through the still they always got fine resin. They were forced to do that because the Hercules Powder Co. was turning out fine resins from the stumps. They washed the crude down and got fine resins. The gum people were learning from their competitors. Of course Hercules had a huge research plant in Wilmington, Del. and they learned these things as they studied them. We were forced to compete. You see, the turpentine factor would get the resin and turpentine as it was sent in from the country and we would sell it as such. We didn't know what it was for - we knew it was used for paints and varnishes - and soaps and other things - but we didn't know what was going to become of it. All we did was to receive it from the producer and sell it and take our commission out and give him the difference. But the Hercules people studied what was wanted in the different industries and their research department worked out the different grades of resin that the manufacturer wanted. When we ran up against that kind of competition we had to meet it. So instead of making resin and turpentine at 1500 stills from N.C. to Texas it gradually resolved itself down into about 25 or 30 large stills where the stuff was scientifically handled. That is the crude gum was bought as such regardless of grade and washed so as to make it clear. It was treated and run through a large steam still where it was separated into resin and turpentine in about 40 to 50 minutes whereas the old "coffee pot" method as we called it, would take 3 or 4 hours to run a batch of crude gum through a still and separate the resin from the turpentine. And the only way they had to clarify the resin would be to run it through a

strainer with cotton batting in between. That would take out the pieces of chips and dirt but it didn't change the color of the resin. But the Hercules people washed the crude gum and made fine resin while we were making low grade resin. As I say, gradually as the increase in these large turpentine stills run scientifically, and buying crude gum from anybody they could buy it from, they gradually put the turpentine "coffee pot" still out of business. And that was the beginning of the end for the forage business because the farmer had a cash sale for his crude gum and he didn't need the factor to supply him with his materials and the money. I think in lots of cases nowadays a man will own his tract of land and have two or three boys of his own and they will all work it together and make a certain amount of crude gum and sell it whereas in the olden days the turpentine operator would lease all the timber around he could get and hire a lot of negroes to chip the tree and to collect the crude gum and haul it in. All the labor that was put in there was hired labor whereas today it is on a very small scale and almost a family proposition. The negroes today don't want to work turpentine. They can go into a little town nearby and work at some manufacturing plant and make more money with less work and shorter hours.

**White:** Was your acquaintance with Dr. Cary very intimate? Did you see a lot of him?

**Kayton:** No. I would see him frequently but only for a short period. For instance, I would meet him in Waycross, Ga. and maybe spend a night in the hotel and spend a day in the woods with him or with him and Miss Gerry. And that would probably be just a day's trip. We might meet at Sessom's place and have dinner with Mr. Sessoms and go out over the woods in the afternoon. But it was usually only one or two days. And in those days Frank Heyward would come along. He was a young fellow, just going into the business.

**White:** I know that you helped out by making the operators conscious of the worth of forestry and turpentine practice ideas.

**Kayton:** We tried to explain to them that they were their own worst enemies. They were doing things that they should never have done, and were not doing the things they should have done. And another thing, when the depression came on in 1930-33 a lot of the operators were working trees that were too small. In other words they would work a big tree and a small tree and a  $\frac{3}{4}$  tree maybe and another big tree and a couple of small trees and were working them all together without knowing which tree was producing a profit and which tree they were losing money on. Then the government came into the picture at that time with a conservation plan. They found out from their experience that if a man worked a tree less than 9 inches across at the fact that he was not making any money on it. And if he worked an 8 inch or a 7 inch face he was losing money on it. So they paid the operators a small amount not to work the trees that were less than 9 inches at the face. The government, in order to help preserve the forest, paid these men. They got a list of how many trees the man was working and sent inspectors through to check on them and would pay them so much a tree not to work the trees he should not work and that he would only work at a loss. When they let those trees alone for a few years they would enlarge in size and

would get in shape they could work them.

**White:** How much damage did chipping these too small trees do?

**Kayton:** Well, the increment borer would show that when you started working a tree, unless it was a very old tree and the rings were already getting small, the rings would commence getting smaller. You were taking something out of the tree. If you let the tree alone the rings would commence getting larger again. But the operators didn't know that. It took a man like Cary with an increment borer to go in there and take one of their trees and show them they were stunting the growth of their trees. He could show them from one boring where they had a drought year or where a fire went through. He could show them the ill effects on growth of fire and he could show them where they had a good year of rain and were not working the trees and the trees would produce large rings. He convinced a great many of the more intelligent members of the group that they were losing money on working trees that shouldn't be worked, especially after a fire. If fire went through you should wait for two or three years so that when the tree was chipped it would be on full rings. Those were the things that Cary showed them: To prevent fires and also why they should prevent them.

**White:** How responsive were operators to instruction of this kind? How much inertia did you have to overcome? How prevalent was the idea "This is the way it has always been done?"

**Kayton:** I think about 50 or 60% of the operators were amenable to reason. But there was always a little group in there nobody could tell anything. But I don't think there are any of them now that don't understand the advantage to the tree when the [sic] wait to chip.

**White:** Was there much resistance to this instruction? Did you have to lay some groundwork to get this across?

**Kayton:** Well, it took a few years to convince some of these boys. And then again when the paper mills came in and began to buy up the land and land became more valuable they realized they were throwing away their best assets. I haven't had occasion to go out in the woods for the last few years and I don't see any of the operators except occasionally one of my old clients will come in here and pay me a little visit. But I think the majority of them are all convinced. If a man just wants to stand of his own weight you can't stop him but I think it is an established fact that fire injures the trees and that they should not be worked below certain standards.

**White:** Were you familiar with Dr. Cary's economic views, with his position on government regulation and land acquisition?

**Kayton:** No. I may have discussed it with him. He was very stubborn in his views, very set, and his ideas were very sound as a general rule. He knew what he was trying to accomplish and he went ahead with that.

**White:** I think he was something of a business man.

**Kayton:** I know he bought some stock in the Sessoms Co. He got dissatisfied

before others of us did and he sold out. He sold his stock back because he disapproved of the way the company was operated. Others of us who held stock in the company were of the same opinion and followed Cary is [sic] selling out. Sessoms had at one time been engaged in a speculation in Mexico. He also built and operated a little railroad from Fargo to Waycross. He lost money on almost everything he did I think and finally, after his venture in Mexico he came back and discovered the best thing he had was right there in Georgia if he just developed it. He never stuck to one thing. That was his trouble, he never concentrated on one thing and stuck to it. Sessoms had some trouble with small landowners, particularly over the problem of fires. Some owners had relatively small areas of land they were holding that were within the confines of Sessoms' large holdings. He tried to buy them out and they wouldn't get out. Several of these fellows burned little patches of his land several times and it annoyed him. So he thought he would get even with them. He went down one night and put some poison in one of the water holes and killed some of their cattle. Well, it was the worst thing he could have done because on one nice windy, dry, March day fire started in 4 or 5 places right in the midst of his land. The wind was behind it and his fire fighting equipment took 3 days to stop the fire. Captain Eldredge came over and looked over the place and he and his men estimated the fire had burned out about 65,000 dollars worth of timber.

**White:** Do you assume this was retaliation by the farmers?

**Kayton:** Undoubtedly. He thought so. He said he had done a fool thing by poisoning the cattle but he couldn't undo it. If the fire had started in just one place - but it started in 4 or 5 places and before he could get his men out to cope with one fire another was burning and the wind just swept the fire through.

**White:** Do you recall what year that was?

**Kayton:** I think it was 1933. '33 or '34.

**White:** Did the law passed by the legislature regarding fire work very effectively?

**Kayton:** Well, there were very few prosecutions. I think it was education. I think that as people found out it was doing damage that was hurting them no farmer would burn somebody else's woods today to destroy the boll weevil. They actually did that believing the boll weevil hibernated in the woods.