

## The Catface Country Turpentine Festival



Examples of catfaces on display at the Bobby Ronald Newton Turpentine Museum. On the left is a tree that was boxed; the other shows the cup-and-gutter system.

Now nearly forty years old, the Catface Festival commemorates the town's historic connection to the once vital naval stores industry, which had its heyday in Portal—the self-proclaimed “Turpentine City”—in the mid-twentieth century. At the festival, visitors can closely observe the entire turpentine manufacturing process and visit a turpentine museum.<sup>2</sup> This Rockwellian small-town festival even has a parade replete with event-themed floats and beauty queens, a true throwback to an earlier time. It all makes for a fun and informative forest history outing. Portal (population 650) is an hour's drive northwest of Savannah, and the festival is held in early October.

### THE NAVAL STORES INDUSTRY

Products made from pine resin, such as turpentine, tar, and pitch for ships and household products like soap, are collectively known as naval stores. Pitch and tar were essential for waterproofing ship hulls and decks and for preserving ships' rigging.<sup>3</sup> Even after their uses for naval purposes diminished, the term persisted to describe the industry and its products.<sup>4</sup>

The naval stores industry played an important role in the economic history of the American South.<sup>5</sup> As early as 1608, Virginia producers were sending pitch and tar from pine trees to England.<sup>6</sup> One of the English colonies' first industries, naval stores remained a vital one in the South well into the twentieth century. In the South, longleaf pine and slash pine were the preferred species.<sup>7</sup>

By Thomas J. Straka

Festival photographs by Patricia A. Straka

Festivals across the United States highlight aspects of forests and forest products. All across New England, maple syrup festivals fill the late winter weekend calendar. The West Virginia Forest Festival has celebrated the beauty of the Mountain State's fall foliage since 1930. In Washington State, the Mason County Forest Festival was established in 1945 to honor “the area's logging history by showcasing the value of timber to

the community, while demonstrating the importance of safeguarding the forests against destructive fires.”<sup>1</sup>

Turpentine was a staple of the naval stores industry, a few remnants of which are scattered around the South. Places like McCranie's Turpentine Still in Willacoochee, Georgia, and the restored still on the University of Florida's Austin Cary Forest make for great forest history road trips. But only Portal, Georgia, holds a celebration of the product itself, with the Catface Country Turpentine Festival. The turpentine distillery in Portal is one of only three remaining in Georgia and is the only one that operates on its original site.



The Carter turpentine still in operation.

system by Charles H. Herty in the early 1900s and other technological innovations. The new practices did not require cutting a deep box, nor did they damage the trunk too severely, so trees worked for gum would sustain less loss of timber. Eventually cheaper products and high labor costs led to the collapse of the industry by 1960 and its demise in 2001.<sup>10</sup>

At the distillery the gum was mixed with a small amount of water and heated in a copper still until the mixture began to boil. Vapor would flow through tubing called a “worm,” where it was cooled by water, then condenses and drips into a collection barrel as spirits of turpentine. The mixture would contain both water and turpentine, so laborers would skim turpentine from the surface. This was called gum turpentine. Rosin would congeal at the bottom of the still, and a tap would allow it to flow into a trough for collection. The master distiller knew when to add more water or increase the heat from sounds made by the worm or the boiling gum.<sup>11</sup> The process, which takes from four to six hours, can be seen in its entirety at the Catface Country Turpentine Festival.<sup>12</sup>

#### THE FESTIVAL AT PORTAL

The turpentine industry in Portal began with F. N. Carter Sr. and his son E. C. Carter, who began operating the Carter Turpentine Still in the mid-1930s.<sup>13</sup> At that time, the United States accounted for more than half of rosin and turpentine production worldwide, but by the 1960s, production had dramatically decreased, due to international competition, increased labor and production costs, and a labor force that preferred to work in the pulpwood industry over the

Turpentine refers to tapping crude gum (or resin) from living pine trees and distilling it into spirits of turpentine and rosin. Traditionally, turpentine began with “boxing” the trees. A long-headed axe was used to cut an elliptical hole or notch, called a box, roughly eight to twelve inches wide and four to five inches deep at the base of the tree trunk. This formed a cavity used to collect the resin. Next, the box was “cornered”: bark was removed in a chevron pattern on each upper side of the box. These slash marks resembled whiskers on a cat’s face. As protection from insects and disease, the wounded tree would secrete gum, which flowed into the box. After about ten days the turpentine returned and collected the resin, dipping a cup into the box and

pouring the contents into barrels to await transport to a distillery. Using a tool called a hack, he also chipped a new streak on the catface to generate more gum. A turpentine would chip and dip a “crop” of 10,000 catfaces in a season (from April to October), typically harvesting 150 barrels of gum turpentine.<sup>8</sup> The entire process was labor intensive and hard work.

Within a few years, the cuts would kill the tree. Boxing and chipping ruined the trees for lumber, even though longleaf pine is excellent for shipbuilding because of its straight, clear wood. After depleting a stand, turpentiners would move to a new one, and the industry slowly migrated across the South, from Virginia to Texas.<sup>9</sup> That changed with the development of the cup-and-gutter



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:**

This turpentine still, photographed around 1903 in North Carolina, is similar to the Carter Still in Georgia.

Fire is needed both for making turpentine and a snack. Rosin potatoes are boiled over an open flame.

The spirits of turpentine flow from the still tubing, which comes through the wall, into a barrel. It wasn't clear if the quality can be judged by the smell or if it just smells good.



turpentine industry.<sup>14</sup> The Carter still ceased operation in the 1960s and laid dormant for the next 20 years. Unlike other turpentine stills, which were dismantled for valuable copper tubing and iron boilers, the Carter still remained intact. In the 1980s it was restored and is the only one in Georgia on its original site.

Because of the slash marks on the “boxed” pine tree, “Catface

Country” was incorporated into the festival’s name. This being a typical small-town festival, it starts with a parade featuring fire engines and other emergency vehicles, marching bands, local celebrities, and floats. But only this parade has turpentine-themed floats, some carrying several Miss Turpentines of various ages. On the parade route is Carter’s General Store, now more of an antiques store

than a general store. It houses a small museum with farming and turpentine items, including an example of a catface. The parade route is walking distance to the festival grounds.

The festival includes all the food, entertainment, arts and crafts, and children’s attractions you’d expect at a local celebration like this. Even the food has a turpentine connection. It must have been a desperate forest

worker who first tried boiling potatoes in rosin, but tradition holds that the rosin distributes the heat exceptionally well, producing a truly delicious treat. The potatoes (both Russets and sweet potatoes) are cooked in bubbling 350-degree rosin for an hour. Because of the rosin, you can't eat the skin, but the potatoes are tasty.<sup>15</sup>

The highlight for this forest history buff was the Carter Turpentine Still and the adjacent Bobby Ronald Newton Turpentine Museum. The master turpentine offers tours for only a few visitors at a time because the space is small and the still is actually operating. The turpentine coming from the still flows into a barrel in the turpentine museum. Rosin flows in the opposite direction late in the day at the end of the process.

It's a wonderful way to spend a day learning about southern culture, an interesting aspect of southern forest history and technology, listening to good music, and perhaps eating your first rosin-boiled potato.

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## NOTES

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2. "Portal Readies for Turpentine Festival," *Statesboro Herald*, October 2, 2018, <https://www.statesboroherald.com/local/portal-readies-turpentine-festival/>.
3. J. Merriam Peterson, "History of the Naval Stores Industry in America," Part I, *Journal of Chemical Education* 16, no. 5 (May 1939): 203-12, and Part II, *Journal of Chemical Education* 16, no. 7 (July 1939): 317-22.
4. Percival Perry, "The Naval-Stores Industry in the Old South, 1790-1860," *Journal of Southern History* 34, no. 4 (November 1968): 509-26; Justin Williams, "English Mercantilism and Carolina Naval Stores," *Journal of Southern History* 1, no. 2 (May 1935): 169-85.



**The rosin is collected from the still at the side opposite of the turpentine.**

5. Joseph J. Malone, *Pine Trees and Politics: The Naval Stores and Forest Policy in Colonial New England, 1691-1775* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964); Robert B. Outland III, *Tapping the Pines: The Naval Stores Industry in the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004).
6. Thomas Gamble, "Early History of the Naval Stores Industry in North America," in *Naval Stores: History Distribution and Consumption*, ed. Thomas Gamble (Savannah, GA: Review Publishing & Printing, 1921), 17-23. In the northern colonies, the New England pitch pine (*Pinus rigida*) was the primary species tapped.
7. James P. Barnett, *Naval Stores: A History of an Early Industry Created from the South's Forests*, General Technical Report SRS-240 (Asheville, NC: USDA Forest Service, Southern Research Station, 2019), 5-11; Carrol B. Butler, *Treasures of the Longleaf Pines: Naval Stores* (Shalimar, FL: Tarkel Press, 1998).
8. Melvin Herndon, "Naval Stores in Colonial Georgia," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (December 1968): 426-33; Jeffrey R. Dobson and Roy Doyon, "Expansion of the Pine Oleoresin Industry in Georgia: 1842 to Ca. 1900," *West Georgia College Studies in the Social Sciences* 18 (June 1979): 43-57; Robert B. Outland III, "Slavery, Work, and the Geography of the North Carolina Naval Stores Industry, 1835-1860," *Journal of Southern History* 62, no. 1 (February 1996): 27-56.
9. Lee J. Vance, "Gathering Naval Stores," *Appleton's Popular Science Monthly* 48 (February 1896), 469-80; Naval Stores Research Division, Bureau of Agricultural Chemistry and Engineering, *Production of Naval Stores*, Miscellaneous Publication No. 476 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1941), 1-10.
10. Barnett, *Naval Stores*, 1-2, 39; Outland, *Tapping the Pines*, chapter 3.
11. Nelson Courtlandt Brown, *Forest Products: Their Manufacture and Use* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1919), 165-88; A. J. Panshin, E. S. Harrah, W. J. Baker, and P. B. Proctor, *Forest Products: Their Sources, Production, and Utilization* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950), 417-53.
12. Kenneth H. Thomas Jr.'s *McCranie's Turpentine Still* (The University of Georgia Institute of Community & Area Development and Georgia Department of Natural Resources, 1975), has detailed descriptions of how a still operated and how both the box and cup-and-gutter systems worked. Although the McCranie family only operated the still from 1936 to 1942, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976.
13. Brian Brown, "Catface Turpentine Festival, Portal," *Vanishing South Georgia*, accessed February 6, 2020, <https://vanishingsouthgeorgia.com/tag/portal-ga/>.
14. Percival Perry, "Naval Stores," in *Encyclopedia of American Forest and Conservation History*, Volume 2, ed. Richard C. Davis (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1983), 471-79; "American Turpentine Farmers Association: Minute Books, 1936-1999: History," accessed February 6, 2020, <http://russelldoc.galib.uga.edu/atfa/history/index.html>.
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