

## CRACKER TURPENTINE STILL

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Woodsmen were responsible for extracting the raw gum, or rosin, commonly known as dip from pine trees. They chipped the trees and put up cups to collect the dip. To extract the raw gum which was distilled into turpentine and rosin, the trees had to be "faced." First a thin slab of bark and wood was removed from the base of the tree with a broad axe. Slanting cuts one half inch to three fifths inch deep were then made into the slabbed surface, the lowest cut about twelve inches above the ground. Next galvanized iron gutters, or tins were inserted into the axe cuts and a cup was placed to catch the gum.

When the cup was filled, the raw gum was transferred to a large barrel to be taken to the still. Before "cupping" became widespread, a hollow place was made in the tree itself to catch the gum. This method, known as "boxing," was done with a special turpentine axe.

The dip barrels were hauled from the woods to the still on large wagons with oversized wheels. The dip barrels were unloaded at the still dock. At some stills the men rolled the dip barrels, each weighing 500 pounds, up a wooden ramp to the second level where they were emptied into the top of the copper still kettle. This operation was called "charging." Four charges were processed every day.

When the kettle was full the cap was tightened securely and the cooking started. The fire required large quantities of wood and did not touch the kettle, but heated the air in a cavity surrounding the kettle. As the charge cooked the turpentine and water vapors were forced through an outlet in the cap to the condensing coils. The coils ran through a tank of cool water where the vapors inside condensed and emptied into the first separating barrel.

In the first separating barrel the spirits of turpentine rose to the top, and most of the water settled to the bottom. A siphon just below the rim of the barrel drained the turpentine into a second separating barrel where rock salt extracted the remaining water. A plug at the bottom of the first barrel allowed the water to drain off.

When a charge finished cooking, the kettle was uncapped and allowed to cool until it stopped frothing. Then the tailgate was opened and the hot rosin passed through a series of strainers. The first strainer was very coarse and separated out the dross (pieces of pine cones, pine needles and other impurities). Subsequent filters became progressively finer until only pure amber rosin remained. Rosin quality is determined by its color; the lighter its shade the higher the grade. After clarification, the pure rosin was collected in a V-shaped vat. From these vats the rosin was dipped into a perforated trough set upon empty barrels. When the barrels were filled the trough was rotated to the next set of empty barrels.

Rosin was the most important byproduct of the distilling process. It was used in caulking wooden ships, in explosives, for making soap, and as a sizing in the manufacture of paper.

These small turpentine stills once dotted the piney woods of north and central Florida as part of a thriving industry. With the introduction of huge central turpentine distillery plants during World War II, the "Cracker" stills and their small community of workers faded into Florida's historical heritage

# 'Teppintine' life was harsh

**T**hroughout North and Central Florida, the living and working conditions of "teppintine" men were primitive and harsh. Crews, and sometimes their families, were crowded into isolated shanties.

The windows of turpentine camp shacks at Markham came with wooden shutters, but no glass. Some of the families used cheesecloth as screens.

Gaping cracks in the pine-plank floors made sweeping out sand simple, but they also invited mosquitoes indoors.

Sleeping under netting kept some of the pests away at night, but sometimes—when the bugs were really bad—folks tossed burning rags under the floor. Rising smoke would chase out the mosquitoes—and sometimes the people, too.

The camp houses were long and narrow with rooms lined one behind the other, opening off a hallway along one side. Some called them shogun houses, because a shotgun could be fired from the front door to the back without hitting a wall.

One room served as kitchen and dining room. A wood stove provided heat, and families had no electricity or running water.

It was rare for the children to have their own room. Most slept with their parents or on cots in the front room.

Sometimes, the settlers crowded two or three families into each of a cluster of camp houses.

The food and wages were miserable. Many were forced to trade their earnings for overpriced goods at company stores. In most areas, the laws were made and enforced by labor contractors.

Florida's vast first-growth forests "yielded fabulous profits" for the mostly out-of-state companies that owned the timber and turpentine rights. The companies, though, kept the men who worked the trees in a "pine pitch fiefdom," Florida historian Gene M. Burnett writes in *Florida's Past*.

Leesburg-born folksinger/songwriter Doug Spears wrote his soulful song "Teppintine" about the despair that drove many to give up hope.

*You don't get into Teppintine.*

*You're born into it,*

*And you spend your life trying to get out*

*Of this hell in the Florida pine.*

*And Good God Almighty get me out*

*of this old Teppintine.*

*Got me a one-room shack,*

*And a woman they owned.*

*Got three kids but we're bound to have more.*

*And I don't know how I'm ever going to*

*keep them alive.*

*And Good God Almighty get my kids*

*Out of this old Teppintine.*



Resin atop a stump was part of the Markham marker ceremony on April 20.

## Historic marker recalls Markham life

SEMINOLE COUNTY



**O**n April 20, the Florida Park Service dedicated a historic marker just east of the sharp bend where Longwood-Markham Road becomes Markham Road. The marker site, which is within the Wekiva Basin Geopark, is near the Markham community's cemetery.

The marker honors the industrious Markham people:

*They built railroads, produced lumber and turpentine, grew citrus and worked the land. Markham and its surrounding area attracted not only a labor pool, but also permanent settlers who built homes and bought and farmed their own land. ...They worked hard, educated their children, and survived many hardships with dignity.*