

Magazine Feature Section

PASSING OF SOUTHERN CONVICT CAMPS

Nature, in Running Out of Great Pine Forests for the Production of Turpentine, Seems to Be Aiding Legislation in Doing Away with the Old System.

BY MARC N. GOODNOW.

It was a typically beautiful midwinter Sunday in Central Florida. A tramp of several miles through the whispering pines of a turpentine forest had brought a party of tourists to a clump of rough, whitewashed, board buildings situated in the white sand close to a railroad. From a distance the largest building had the appearance of a warehouse of a stable surrounded by a high board fence or stockade. It was a story and a half high, thrice as long as its width, with windows along the sides, heavily barred.

At diagonally opposite corners of the high stockade were rudely constructed platfoms, each sheltered by a rude a roof of pine boards. Beneath each shelter sat a young man, lazily smoking a cigarette, with ominous, long-barreled pistols beside him.

Near the railroad stood another low white building. Inside another inclosure was a small, one-story shack, from one end of which a cloud of smoke issued, proclaiming the kitchen. Farther back in the same inclosure was another shack, open on three sides, and a pig pen.

In the middle of the sandy yard stood a well, fed from surface water and the excess of the bayou more than a mile away. There were no trees, no grass, no shade of any kind, nothing but hot, white sand and a few stumps.

A lean, swarthy man of 35 years, wearing the ubiquitous black slouch hat, and known by the official title of "Captain," welcomed the rather curious visitors, and with some show of native pride even invited them to take a look about the camp—the camp being a prison, housing some forty negro convicts.

"Sunday mornin' the men spend in cleanin' up, takin' baths and changin' clothes," drawled the captain, as the big gate of the stockade swung open and a growing pile of soiled, striped flannel garments became conspicuous. There was the unique sight of a score of nude convicts, exchanging soiled garments for fresher ones. Their glistening bodies were burnished bronze in the strong sunlight, and their huge, knotted muscles played under the skin like great cables.

The interior of the bunkhouse and messroom was even more crude as a place in which to live than the exterior as a means of shelter. No attempt had been made to "finish" the building, as craftsmen would say; that is, to ceil, or plaster, or remove the bare effect of rafters and boards. A barricade of heavy timbers set vertically from floor to roof formed a partition between messroom and sleeping quarters. Next to the only door of the building was a small cage of heavy timbers and furnished with a small heating stove and a chair for the guard who kept night vigil over the forty sleeping convicts.

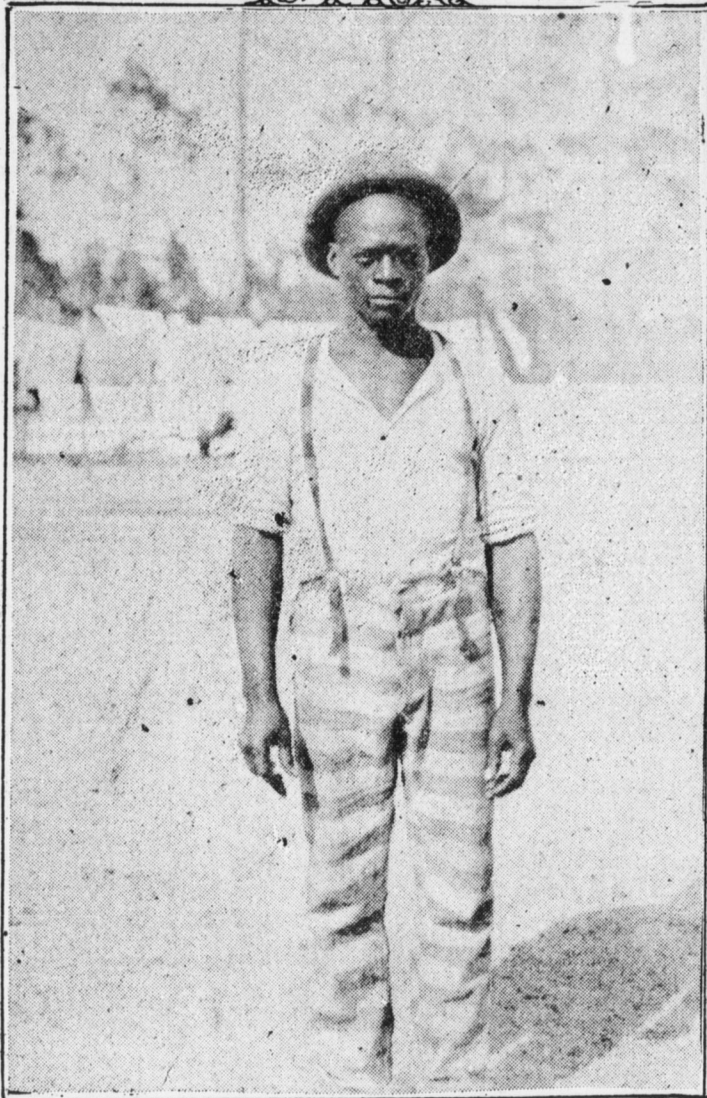
Sans Knives, Sans Forks.

Two zinc-covered tables to the right of the entrance formed the dining board; boxes and broken chairs formed the seats. In a corner close by stood a sink and basin where the dishes were washed. Only dishes, pans and spoons are used inside this stockade. There are no knives or forks (except for warden and guards). Fingers were made first; besides, knives and forks are much too ugly as weapons in a quarrel.

In the same room, at the corner farthest from the door, were two cracked porcelain-lined tubs set in an unscreened space, merely surrounded by torn wire netting. Several more broken chairs and boxes and a heating stove within a wooden pen completed the furniture and equipment of the messroom. On one wall hung an illumination of the ten commandments and several illustrated psalms. On another wall hung the rules and regulations of the state prison authorities, almost too black from soot and grime to be deciphered. Except for these wall decorations, there was no evidence anywhere of any reading matter.

The bunkroom was a long, low compartment filled with iron beds supporting filthy mattresses. The floor was bare and reasonably clean, and the entire interior smelled strongly of a mixture of formaldehyde and other disinfectants.

"The beds are a bit old," was the explanation volunteered, "but we've made a requisition for new ones. We disinfect every other day and scrub the floor every



THIS TRUSTY HAS BEEN CHASED by THE HOUNDS



morning. Sunday morning, of course, the men always take their time about things."

In the messroom the prisoners were singing and laughing and telling jokes. In one corner a black figure was just emerging from his "tub"; in another, the tinkle of tin and granite dishes told of preparations for dinner.

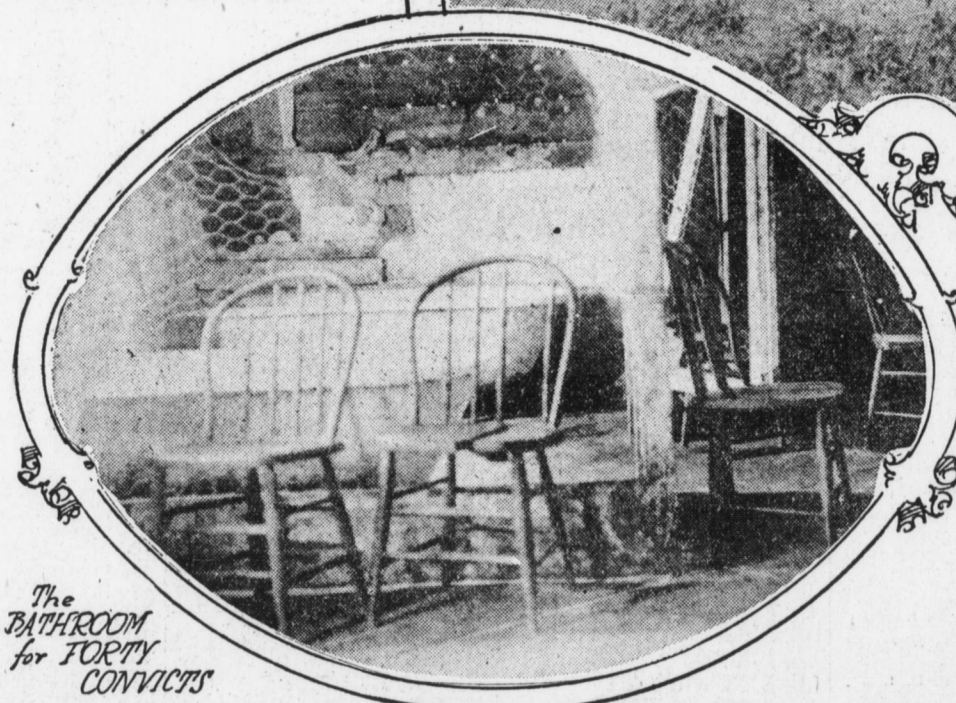
"Where's Charlie Jackson?" called the captain, and two barefooted men shambled off to find Jackson. Presently the most genial smile one ever saw peered around the jamb of the door, and a slender young negro of 30 years shuffled into the room.

"Charlie," said the captain, "let's have a little harmonizin'."

"Yassah, boss," he smiled, and forthwith assembled his troupe of vaudeville entertainers. Charlie disappeared for a moment and returned in his theatrical rigging of false whiskers, crooked cane, corn-cob pipe, straw hat and a band in his back which, with one arm akimbo, proclaimed him old "Uncle Eph" in the original skit, The Old Plantation. "Eph" had returned after forty years' absence to see his "old mammy and the chillun." "Mammy Liza" was enacted by a young Luck with a bandanna tied about his head



BASEBALL



The BATHROOM for FORTY CONVICTS

and falling over his shoulders.

Camp Meeting Songs.

In the midst of this skit, in which "Uncle Eph" referred to his children generally as "big hunks o' midnight," and in which each was letter perfect, they all broke into the song, "Pickin' Cotton," which was the cue for "buck and wing" dancing. Each of the seven indulged in his own brand of dancing and executed steps never saw before—in shoes and barefeet

Some one pitched a quarter to the floor, and the antics of the dancer in picking up the coin threw the observers into spasms of laughter. Then followed a series of pantomime and camp-meeting songs and hymns by another set of singers—curiously enough, the most vicious men in the camp, it was said.

"Almost every night it's just like this," said a guard. "They go over this stuff time and again. They gave a minstrel show last Christmas and made quite a

lot of money from the visitors." "Don't they do it largely to forget they are here?"

"All their singing and dancing wouldn't make them forget that," answered the guard, with a significant glance. "But after the first three or four months the tragedy wears off and they get to be like the fellows who have been here for years. It's the man who first comes to one of these camps that broods and gets sullen and is always thinking of 'gettin' away.

That's the dangerous time, when he has to be watched, and about the only time when he tries to break camp. I could almost tell you how long every man has been in this stockade simply by the look on his face."

All the men were in their bare feet; feet, too, that were swelled and misshapen almost beyond recognition. They were spread out, broken down, cut, gugged, blistered and scratched; and the nails of many of their toes were gone. It is hard to imagine what comfort such feet will ever find in the shoes of civilized society when release from prison conditions finally comes.

"Niggah's dat fust comes heah," said Charlie's mate at the grindstone, "what ain't use' to bein' on dey feet, gets fagged easy an' hit mek dey feet swell up sumptin awful, boss. Dat's why dey all goes barefoot in de stockade an' round' camp. Dey shoes ain't big enough foh dey feet. Mine doan swell no mo'."

The "Captain" had neglected to mention that while his visitors were being shown through the camp, a negro convict was being chased through the woods several miles away in the regular Sunday morning rehearsal. This was a weekly practice for the purpose of keeping the dogs' sense of smell keenly whetted to a point of instant usefulness in case of an attempted escape.

third-year trees, another "pull" fourth-year trees. The stills run two charges a day ordinarily, and produce from 100 to 120 gallons of turpentine in one charge.

July and August, the rainy season in Florida, are the worst months of the year for ague, chills, fever, pneumonia and the like. Then it rains almost every day and the water floods the country.

"Dat's de time when it gits you," said a convict in a whisper. "Mah Gawd, man, hit's sho' awful, standin' in watah an' runnin' all day long in the wet grass up to yo' waist. Why, man, ah's got a lump in mah chest right now as big as yo' fist. Every man in this heah camp has got sumpin' the matter of him."

In 1910, Gov. Gilchrist considered twenty deaths among 1781 prisoners a low rate, because "so many are diseased before entering the camps."

Reward for Industry.

All prisoners are worked on the task system, and if they finish their work on Friday evening or early Saturday morning, they have the balance of the week in which to rest. This system, inspectors say, has been the means of getting good work out of the men without punishment. But there are many camps where there is entirely too much punishment, where the warden and guards are not at all suited to their positions.

When you cut or burn your finger and run to the medicine cabinet for a bottle of spirits of turpentine, you seldom stop to think of the way in which this medicine is gathered; how much more of pain it involves than the pain you seek to allay by its use, what bodily and mental travail, what cost in human life.

At the time of my visit to this Florida camp, 1800 or more convicts were leased by the state to one company—the Florida Pine Company—for the sum of \$323.84 per convict annually, and in turn subleased to individual turpentine distillers operating the thirty-one convict camps of the state, for the sum of \$400 a year apiece. Thus the Florida Pine Company was collecting the tidy little sum of about \$76 per annum upon the labor of between 1400 and 1800 convicts—a total of perhaps \$12,000 a year. This company paid to the state one year for the use of convicts \$207,116.48. The arrangement was so satisfactory and profitable to both parties that the lease was renewed in 1909 for a period of four more years; and on January 1, 1914, a number of leases were renewed for two years.

All the convict got out of this sum was a whitewashed stockade, work the year round in all kinds of fever and weather, punishment with a leather strap for in fraction of miles or lagging at work, no energy left for overtime work, even if he were paid for it, and no money for those who might be dependent upon him.

And then, as if the system were incompatible with nature herself, the millions of pine trees began each year to lose their productiveness so it was no longer profitable to operate the camps, a number of which went out of existence when the four-year lease expired in 1914, and others followed, so that the state, both from necessity and policy, provided by statute for the care of its convicts on a state prison farm in Bradford County.

The bill provided that after January 1, 1914, all new prisoners should be placed on the state farm, except that able-bodied ones could be delivered to private leasees or to counties, to replace those whose sentences might have expired or who might have become hospital subjects. As time goes on, the solution, if it can be called that, of the state convict from the turpentine camp to the prison farm becomes a gradual and much-desired process.

Work of the Convicts.

These convicts are worked in three or four squads, each in charge of one or two guards and several cur dogs. One squad may "box" virgin trees, another dip fresh pine pitch, another scrape