AL-25

Sam Jackson
Turpentine Camp
Route 2, Stapleton, Ala.

Box 814,
Fairhope, Ala.
Baldwin County.

too short

SAM, THE TURPENTINE CHOPPER

By Lawrence F. Evans

The sand-trail stopped abruptly. On one side an old cemetery, gone to ruin after the Civil War, reared huge monuments as high as cedars over gaping holes, where lizards and toads lived among the bones of those who had dwelt in peace and plenty in this land. On the other side, a squat turpentine camp, called the quarters, sprawled on the slope of the hill. It was a new camp, only a couple of years old. In this spot Sam Jackson, turpentine chopper, route 2, Stapleton, Alabama, lived with his wife, Lou and their two children.

too much rhetoric

let it do something else. Sprawl ought to have a rest.

Here eight miles from a highway and sixteen miles from a town, was a country slum. Their rude, rent-free shack, crouched low in a semi-circular row of sixteen of a kind. The sheet metal roof covered three rooms of undressed and unpainted pine. There was no ceiling on the roof or walls, merely clumsy partitions made the rooms. The bedrooms contained a [disreputable] iron bed, [forlorn] and lop-sided. In the adjoining room, a crude pine table was built into the wall and its benches were also made of pine lumber. There were no chairs. A dirty quilt on the floor served as a bed for two colored children. The third room was merely a lean-to. It contained an iron cook stove, teetering bravely on three legs. It's best days were gone. There was no kitchen

cut. Let the details speak for themselves

Describe & omit such terms -

cut these terms. We want accurate details, not atmosphere -

O.K. but how do you know? If he told you so, then relate this in his own words.

table, but two shelves held a water bucket, a cup and perhaps a half dozen dishes with two pans and a skillet. That's all there was to the home of Sam and Lou, - except an open privy one hundred feet down the hill from the shack. It leaned crazily and served for two families.

But the pine trees gave volume to the whisper of the breeze at night. ~~Merciful sleep came readily.~~ The huge moss-covered oaks gave shade for the hot days and here the family could rest and the children played while the mothers gathered and gossiped over trivial matters. There were no fences between the shacks, no gardens, no flowers and no automobiles - only the squalid pine shacks with open, unscreened doors.

cut the atmosphere

Sam was twenty-three. He had never seen the inside of a school.

"Taint no use to send cullud chillun to school. Gits too smart," Sam said. He had started in as a turpentine chopper when he was sixteen. His father had worked at it for thirty years and all the boys were in the turpentine work.

Day after day, week after week, and year after year, Sam had arisen at the first break-o-day and gulping his breakfast, hurried through swamps and up hill with his axe and batch of turpentine cups. Sometimes he tapped 2000 trees a day - if the woods-rider would let him. But 1500 trees was a good day's work. That took him into first dark. For this work Sam got eighty cents per thousand trees chopped. Six dollars was an average weeks salary. Six dollars for the needs of a family of four! Six dollars a week could not buy much but Sam said their needs were simple.

On Saturdays the Boss Man sent a truck from town by which

Sam sent his weekly grocery order in to be filled. The cost of groceries was taken out every two weeks on pay day. Sam never bothered to keep track of how much the groceries were. Sometimes there was some money left on pay days. A little. Sometimes there were not enough groceries to last longer than Friday. Then they went without food until Saturday night. Sometimes, too, the foreman gave them a chicken for Sunday but there were not enough chickens growing on the place to supply all of the workers' families.

Once a month there was preaching up the road about three miles. Preaching lasted all day and Sam and Lou took their two children and trudged the three miles and "'joyed de day." Sam thought the preacher was "Presbytery" but Lou believed he was "Mefumdist". So long as there was preaching the denomination made little difference. It was some place to go.

"Chillun orter be teached 'ligion when dey's young," said Sam, and Lou nidded her kinky head in agreement. "Sho orter," she said.

"Lou, buxom and grinning, began her day before Sam, regardless of whether he was working or not. When the coffee was "biling" she called Sam. The "chillun got up nohow." They had corn-pone, side meat and flour gravy. On Sundays the kids had oatmeal but there was no milk or sugar. They ate it with gravy. Field peas were cooked for Sam's lunch with an occasional green vegetable from the foreman's garden. At noon the meal for Lou and the chillun was the same as breakfast while a supper was made of the remainder of the vegetables cooked for Sam's lunch - with the same menu of breakfast and noon. When Sam did not

have vegetables for his noon day meal there was a thick slice of cheese to go with the corn-bread and side-meat.

"Diet? Nawsuh boss, us ain't ready to do no dyin' yit, nawsuh!"

"Is I ever voted? Nawsuh we ain't never voted none. Turpentine niggers ain't got no bizness votin'. Us leaves dat to de woods-rider and to de Boss Man up to Bay Minette."

Politics were things apart, as remote as Mars or the Milky Way.

Sam and Lou were as apathetic about medicine for the family as they were about politics.

"Us is all strong folks," says Lou. "We ain't never needed no medicine 'cept'n when de boy had 'lignant fever. Boss Man sont down some quinine and Boy is good now. Nawsuh, dat ain't his name. We jes calls him Boy and de yudder one Gal. Us ain't never got 'roun' to namin' 'em yit. Ef'n de Boy starts to school next year we'll name him den."

Come evening all the negroes in the camp came out and sat in front of the quarters, under the stars. A big Buck who owned a banjo and winning ways "wid de womens" entertained always and too often razors flashed in black and adept hands, at jugular veins. Casualties were ordinary occurrences. Dusky and buxom ladies, flaunted their charms under the noses of jealour wives. Bantering between sexes brought, too often, swift physical reprisals. "Us is all usen to dat," said Sam. And this came as a form of entertainment to them.

Since Sam and Lou had no real "dress-up" clothes, they had not been to town in more than a year - nor had they been to a picture-show in two or three years; they had forgotten.

The children had never been. With little to do save sit under the stars and sing on warm summer evenings, is it little wonder that the irresponsible temper of this dusky race turns to light love making and burning passion?

"Taint no use to worry yo' haid 'bout money-makin'. 'Taint nothin' in nothin' dees days," said Sam. And Sam stood up with broad, black shoulders glistening in the sun as we drove away.

And now gentle reader, do you think that we should have asked Sam and Lou what was their opinion of birth control, or relative values of income, or what their ideals were?

S.B.J.

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