

THE PEOPLE'S RECORDER

EPISODE 5: DEEP IN TURPENTINE

[Archival from the Mary Margaret McBride Show from the Library of Congress]

HOST: It's 1943. A popular radio show host has a special guest.

ANNOUNCER (ARCHIVAL): *Yes, it's 1:00 and here's Mary-Margaret McBride.*

MARY MARGARET MCBRIDE (ARCHIVAL): *Who didn't sleep a wink last night. And I didn't want to get up this morning, and I was thinking of you all the time, Zora.*

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): *Much obliged, Ms. McBride.*

MARY MARGARET MCBRIDE (ARCHIVAL): *Our guest today is Zora Neale Hurston, H-U-R-S-T-O-N, and her book right now is, Dust Tracks on a Road, which is the story of her own life.*

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): *Yes, this is my sixth book. Dust Tracks on a Road.*

MARY MARGARET MCBRIDE (ARCHIVAL): *Of course, that just gives no idea all things that have happened to Zora Neale Hurston. In that time, she's had Guggenheim Fellowships and she's been elected to anthropological fellowships and what's what other one?*

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): *Ethnological.*

MARY MARGARET MCBRIDE (ARCHIVAL): *Ethnological fellowships.*

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): *Yes. And folklore.*

MARY MARGARET MCBRIDE (ARCHIVAL): *Yes, and she's going around the country collecting folklore, and done a beautiful job. But all of that will come out, I think, as we talk along...*

HOST: Zora Neale Hurston is one of the most celebrated storytellers of American history. In 1938, she took a job with the Federal Writers' Project, and worked remotely, as we'd say today, from her hometown of Eatonville, just outside Orlando. As part of her work for the Writers' Project, she gathered stories of Black life in Florida for a new book about the state, the WPA Guide to Florida.

The Writers Project gave her license to gather Florida stories nobody had ever heard. She was in the first generation to go out and record people's actual voices, using the latest audio equipment. In the process, Hurston created a template that influenced the entire Writers' Project. And she tested out her process in Florida.

[Theme music starts]

HOST: This is The People's Recorder, and I'm your host, Chris Haley. This podcast explores the work of the Federal Writers' Project, a 1930s government agency that set out to document the lives of everyday Americans. The Project raised as many questions as it answered in its quest to hold up a mirror to America - questions that we still ask ourselves today.

In the Spring of 1939, Zora Neale Hurston received two things from the Federal Writers' Project: a long overdue raise, to almost \$80 a month, and also a new mandate: to map out a recording tour to capture people's stories and songs, especially along the Gulf Coast's Black communities. Finally recognized by the Washington office for her expertise, Hurston now had a chance to do work more in line with her own goals of documenting Florida's rural voices.

Hurston would be accompanied on her mission by a colleague on the Writers' Project, a young white folklore collector named Stetson Kennedy. In 2005, we accompanied Kennedy to the site of one of their more fruitful recording sessions from 1939.

[Audio from Kennedy's visit to Clara White]

STETSON KENNEDY: *So, that's the way I remember it, the red brick. And a lot of people outside standing in line.*

MAN AT CLARA WHITE: *They still standing in line, so that ain't changed much.*

STETSON KENNEDY: *How many meals you suppose been served here since it opened? How many millions?*

HOST: The Clara White Mission in Jacksonville began as a soup kitchen in the early 1900s. Run by humanitarian Eartha White, whose mother had survived slavery, the Mission served daily meals to people in need. This was Kennedy's first time back in decades. Almost by instinct, he went right back into collecting stories from the people who were at the Mission.

STETSON KENNEDY: *You still singing songs?*

MAN: *Still singing songs, praising God. You remember the songs y'all used to sing?*

STETSON KENNEDY: *I was mentioning that one it was about "Lord I'm running. Trying to make a hundred." I guess it comes all the way down from plantation days.*

MAN: *Oh yeah. You wanna sing it together?*

STETSON KENNEDY: *I can't sing at all. I'm not kidding.*

MAN: *Well, it goes something similar like this. * Lord, I'm running. Trying to make a hundred. Ninety-nine and a half won't do. Lord, I'm running. Trying make a hundred. Ninety-nine and a half won't do.**

STETSON KENNEDY: *That's how I struck up conversations here sixty years ago.*

HOST: These stories and songs came straight from Florida life and culture, but they would reverberate far beyond the state's borders. Kennedy saw how important these interviews were for the country, and for changing its view of history.

STETSON KENNEDY: *The entire tradition of oral history in my opinion arose out of the Writers Project. Instead of academicians looking at secondary sources and quoting one another, this was a matter of quoting people who actually participated in or witnessed history. And when you do that, you get the emotions that go with it. And the thinking that goes with it.*

HOST: Dr. Tameka Hobbs agrees. A Florida native, author and oral historian, Hobbs is the Regional Manager of the African American Research Library and Cultural Center in Fort Lauderdale. She says the process of oral history interviews requires building relationships. They can be as much work as, um, online dating!

TAMEKA HOBBS: *It's a courtship, a mini courtship. There's all the buildup to it, the preparation, the pre-calls, you know, the working sometimes through gate keepers, to actually get to the person that you want to get to, meeting people and trying to convince them to allow you to sit down with them and record them.*

HOST: These relationships have real impact for the people on both sides of the microphone. Kennedy spoke about this during his return to the Clara White Mission.

STETSON KENNEDY: *When I was here those many years ago, Eartha White was still very much here. And we were recording spirituals. The minute we recorded it I said, "I better play this back." So, I did that, and Eartha White said, "Hold everything right there." Says, "We are going to have a little prayer." And what Eartha White prayed on that occasion was...she says, "Lord, this is Eartha White talking to you again. I just want to thank you for giving mankind the intelligence to make such a marvelous machine and for giving us a President like Franklin D. Roosevelt, who cares about saving the songs that people sing." That was her prayer.*

HOST: In addition to recording the vibrance of Black life in the state, the recording tour that Hurston mapped out would also take them straight into the harsher side of America.

On a steamy day in August 1939, Hurston and Kennedy started out from Jacksonville in separate cars. In one of his last interviews, just months before he passed at age 94, Kennedy openly recounted the searing experience.

STETSON KENNEDY (ARCHIVAL): *In those days the Jim Crow system was all pervasive and ruled overall. That meant, among other things, that we couldn't travel together on field trips black and white, much less black and white, male/female. So, we sent Zora ahead as a scout to various locations, and quite often we would arrive on the scene with the recording machine; she would still be there. And that was the case, the Aycock and Lindsay Turpentine plantation in Cross City, Florida in 1939.*

HOST: Kennedy had followed Hurston's Chevy on dirt roads into the deep pine forests west of Gainesville. They stopped at a cluster of barrels and shacks among rows of trees - a turpentine work camp. One of Florida's oldest industries, turpentine was distilled from pine resin the same way syrup comes from maple trees. Except this work camp was run by forced labor. The business of recording stories at work camps was a dangerous one. Camp owners were wary of outsiders poking around and asking too many questions.

STETSON KENNEDY: *It was like entering a foreign country. You know, you had to get almost a visa to get into a turpentine camp. We told the camp operator that we were interested in collecting plantation songs and spirituals and so forth. So, he thought that was okay. Otherwise, anyone trespassing is, you know, to be shot.*

HOST: At the isolated camp in the deep woods, Hurston's crew asked turpentine worker James Griffin to tell the story behind his song "Worked All Summer Long." Griffin was imprisoned 3 months at hard labor in a county Prison Camp. His crime? He was a few days late paying the rent that the company charged workers for their shacks. From the heartache of injustice, Griffin made up a blues. Listen closely and you can hear a young Stetson Kennedy inviting Griffin to share his personal anthem.

[Archival clip from the Library of Congress]

JAMES GRIFFIN (ARCHIVAL): *We all sing it after I went out there and started to sing it. Thought it would be my theme song.*

STETSON KENNEDY (ARCHIVAL): *We'd appreciate it very much now if you'd go ahead and sing it just like you all sang it then.*

JAMES GRIFFIN (ARCHIVAL): **Oh, my dear mother, she prayed this prayer for me; My dear mother, she prayed this prayer for me. She said, "Lord, have mercy on my son, wheresoever he may be...**

HOST: These recordings at Cross City documented a form of slavery that continued out of public view. More than seventy years after slavery was outlawed, these work camps were a result of collusion between law enforcement and the turpentine industry. They held thousands of Black Floridians captive.

Today most people don't know these horrible camps even existed. But they made a searing impression on Wakulla County-based folk singer Ernest Toole. Toole's passion is to showcase Florida's history in his music, warts-and-all, just like the Writers' Project. And he wants to make sure his listeners never forget the harsh realities of Florida's past.

ERNEST TOOLE (singing): **Yeah, the young man lived through this crazy affair and learned for himself that life ain't fair. And it cleared his mind on who you can trust, and taught him how to smile when the world's unjust...**

ERNEST TOOLE: *Following the Civil War, vagrancy laws were passed in Florida, designed to control mainly freed Black slaves. Many were arrested and fined as vagrants. And because these individuals usually could not pay their fines, they were incarcerated.*

ERNEST TOOLE (singing): ** and keep on moving or they call you a tramp. And send you on down to the turpentine camp. Yes, send you on down to the turpentine camp. Oh, you're going on down to the turpentine camp...**

HOST: Despite state laws passed in the 1920s to try and abolish the system, these work camps trapped tens of thousands in poverty for decades. Hurston and Kennedy were desperate to document the stories of those inside. One of their interview subjects was a turpentine worker named Cull Stacey who had been in the camps since he was a child. Now in his 50s, Stacy was initially asked by the WPA team about the song, "I'm Going to Georgia."

[Archival clip from the Library of Congress]

STETSON KENNEDY (ARCHIVAL): *And what did you say your name was?*

CULL STACEY (ARCHIVAL): *Cull Stacey.*

STETSON KENNEDY (ARCHIVAL): *Cull Stacey. How old are you, Mr. Stacey?*

CULL STACEY (ARCHIVAL): *I'm about 56 years old.*

STETSON KENNEDY (ARCHIVAL): *You were telling me a little ago about a song. Now, what is the name of the song you were talking about?*

CULL STACEY (ARCHIVAL): *Well, it's a turpentine song.*

STETSON KENNEDY (ARCHIVAL): *And what's the name of it?*

CULL STACEY (ARCHIVAL): *I'm Going to Georgia to Work in the Turpentine.*

STETSON KENNEDY (ARCHIVAL): *I see, well, let's try humming a little bit.*

CULL STACEY (ARCHIVAL): *Well, all right, I'll do that. Anything you want.*

STETSON KENNEDY (ARCHIVAL): *All right.*

CULL STACEY (ARCHIVAL): *You ready?*

STETSON KENNEDY (ARCHIVAL): *Yep.*

CULL STACEY (ARCHIVAL): **I'm going to Georgia, I'm going to Georgia, I'm going to Georgia, to work in turpentine. Oh, when I get to Georgia to work in turpentine. Oh, when I get to Georgie...**

STETSON KENNEDY: *We started recording around a campfire at night and I got into asking questions not about songs. And the moment I did two or three of the young men jumped up and ran off into the woods and took up positions as sentries to be on the lookout for the white woods-rider in case he showed up.*

Cull Stacey said he had been born in the turpentine. I said, "Why don't you leave and get out?" And he says, "Well, the onliest way out is to die out." I said, "Well, don't you know that they can't make you work against your will? He said, "They do do it." Says, "If you try to leave, they'll kill you."

When all this sort of thing was going on, the sentries came charging up outta the dark and said, "Sing something quick. Here comes the man." So, we'd have to switch gears and sing.

HOST: Memories of the turpentine camp haunted Kennedy throughout his life. Hurston was so disturbed by the stark oppression they witnessed that she was determined to bring it into the public record. Leaving the camp, Hurston reported the abuses to the camp owner. Even doing that put her in danger.

TAMEKA HOBBS: *This was the period in which lynching was still very much a reality. To say that she was a brave soul is a vast underestimation.*

HOST: Early in her career, Dr. Tameka Hobbs spent a lot of time collecting oral histories in rural Florida.

TAMEKA HOBBS: *Even when I was actively collecting oral histories, in going through some of these counties, I remember being warned by locals that my line of questioning was perhaps going to get me into trouble, and that I needed to be concerned for my safety, because I too was traveling alone in very rural places, down dirt roads in underpopulated parts of the county. So, I say that to say, that even though there are, you know, something like 60 years separating the time that I was collecting oral histories, and the time Zora Neale Hurston was collecting her works, some of those same conditions for silence continue.*

HOST: Across generations, tens of thousands of Floridians would toil, out of sight, in such camps. Better enforcement has made forced labor less common today. But in the 1930s, such camps felt like permanent fixtures of the state's economy.

Hurston, moved by the testimony she heard in the camps, wrote twenty-six pages of field notes and an essay titled "Turpentine." Her editors on the Florida Writers' Project never published them.

[Archival clip from the Library of Congress – James Griffin singing]

HOST: The turpentine camp recordings serve as a bridge from historical slavery to present-day mass incarcerations. They remind us of an indifferent system and the families that suffered greatly. This history has contributed to a distrust in our institutions that many still feel today.

[Archival clip from the Library of Congress – James Griffin finishes singing]

STETSON KENNEDY (ARCHIVAL): *Thank you very much, James.*

HOST: Hurston and Kennedy wrapped up their recordings in late summer 1939. Hurston didn't look back. She was ready to move on from government work. Today, the recordings are preserved at the Library of Congress and in Florida public archives. You can listen to many of them on their websites. But the story doesn't end there. Those recordings inspired another generation to retrace their steps.

Peggy Bulger, former director of the Florida Folklife Program, recalls how folklorists took up the torch in the 1970s, and went the extra mile to connect field recordings to the families who contributed to them.

PEGGY BULGER: *We tried to recreate all of the Deep South Florida recordings that Zora made of music. Amazingly enough, many of those musicians were still alive and a lot of them are still singing the same songs. But they remembered those recording sessions. And were able to recreate the session for us. And it was amazing to me how generous they were with their time. And they remembered those sessions back in the 30s as being kind of an amazing time.*

The first recordings that we did, they're called Drop on Down in Florida. I think it was 2018, a company called Dust to Digital redid it as a box set. And so, we went back to the churches up in the panhandle to give them all copies and to thank them. And by this time, many of the people we recorded were passed, but to give back to the families copies of the recordings – We had people who saying, "Oh, my God, that's my grandfather singing." They had never met their grandfather...

HOST: More After the Break.

HOST: Zora Neale Hurston's ethnographic work would inspire one of the most enduring assignments taken up by the federal writers: an accounting of the country's legacy of slavery. In our previous episode on Virginia, we talked about the work of interviewing formerly enslaved people. That was an assignment shared across the offices in all the southern states.

In Florida, WPA writers interviewed hundreds of formerly enslaved people – individuals whose early years were marked by the brutality of slavery. Martin Richardson, one of the small group of Black WPA writers in the Florida office, drove over 300 miles to Pensacola for some interviews. One was with Mary Minus Biddie, who was born in Pensacola in 1833. Richardson typed up a summary of their conversation. When he interviewed her, she was 105, but her images of emancipation were vivid. Read here by an actor.

MARTIN RICHARDSON (VOICED BY ACTOR): *Freedom was at hand. A Negro riding a mule approached Mr. Jamison, who stood on the porch. He told him of the liberation of the slaves. Mr. Jamison had never before been heard to curse, but this was one day he let go a torrent of words unworthy to print. He called Mary's mother and father: "I ain't got no more to do with you. You are free," he said.*

HOST: The Florida Writers Project employed just a few African Americans besides Hurston. But as was the case in Virginia, their work turned up some of the most candid exchanges in the nationwide Slavery Narratives program. They helped create the fullest, firsthand view of slavery in the world. One such interviewer was named Viola Muse, a former hairdresser working in Jacksonville.

Muse found people who remembered slavery in Tampa. One was Evelyn Beasley, who still lived close to where she'd been enslaved. Beasley spoke frankly about her mother's forced relationship with a white slave owner. In her words, "Though he appeared to have developed a real affection for her that lasted even after the slaves had been freed, she always hated him."

Muse wrote her notes from her interviews on the backs of job relief forms, because so few supplies were provided to Black WPA writers. Her papers have been in storage in Jacksonville for over sixty years. In 2021, the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded a grant to make her papers available to the public for the first time.

JAMES MCBRIDE: *These writers existed at a time when they still had a real kinetic and in some cases, familial connection with slavery.*

HOST: James McBride is a screenwriter and author of the National Book Award-winning novel, *The Good Lord Bird*.

JAMES MCBRIDE: *You know, I had a great Aunt, who took me back to the places and so forth. But their connection to that pain and suffering was much closer than my generation.*

HOST: Across the South, many of the slavery narratives recorded by the Writers' Project were conducted by white WPA interviewers. They tend to be marked and limited by the interviewers' racial bias, and the lack of trust the interviewees had.

JAMES MCBRIDE: *I remember reading some of the accounts from some of the southern writers who interviewed some of the slaves. These folks were just stone-cold racists. I mean, they were really ignorant in their racism. But it was also bears mentioning that many of these white writers had the sense to sit down with these people and listen to their stories. And some of them had the sense to try and guide the interviewees in the right direction. Others you could sense that some of the interviewees were very resistant, would say anything to just, you know, get the person out the room.*

HOST: You can hear what McBride is talking about in this interview between a white WPA worker in Texas and Harriet Smith, about her early life in slavery.

[Archival clip from the Library of Congress]

INTERVIEWER (ARCHIVAL): *Well, Aunt Harriet, about how old are you?*

HARRIET SMITH (ARCHIVAL): *Well, I don't know, Mr. Faulk. I really don't know my age, only by the, the children telling me, of course. My ma died, and she didn't know nothing about our age. But the children traced back from the ex-slave up to now...*

INTERVIEWER (ARCHIVAL): *Uh huh. Can you remember slavery days very well?*

HARRIET SMITH (ARCHIVAL): *Of course. I can remember all our white folks. And all the names of them, all the children. Recall every one the children's names.*

INTERVIEWER (ARCHIVAL): *Well, did they treat...did the white folks treat you good?*

HARRIET SMITH (ARCHIVAL): *They was good to us. Good. They never whipped none of their colored people, our colored people.*

HOST: The first-person accounts of slavery and other oral histories – life histories, as the Project called them – are not perfect expressions. Reading between the lines can get painful. But they are rare artifacts from that chapter of American history that we might never have had otherwise.

TAMEKA HOBBS: *For me personally, it's absolutely vital that we tell the stories. And for folks like my own who were working class, because of those realities and the limited access to education, my folks did not have a treasure trove of letters and correspondence that they're passing down. They don't have diaries that are recording their inner thoughts.*

The only thing that we can try to grasp for, like Zora Neale Hurston, is to put a microphone in front of them, and get them to tell us what their lives were like and the things that they experienced.

HOST: Literary Historian Maryemma Graham feels this work became important not just for our history, but for our culture today.

MARYEMMA GRAHAM: *The legacy of the WPA I think is a profound one. Today for instance the way we have returned to looking at slavery in the fiction of Charles Johnson, of Toni Morrison and other writers. We look now at that experience in a sense because we have available to us the rich work that came out of the WPA.*

*For a long time, it was the part of our history we were ashamed of. But the narratives provided by the WPA and the fact that voices of people have to be part of the story of America is a legacy of the WPA. It was as late as the '60s or 70s that we really began to reclaim much of that literature and rewrite in fictional form stories that gave people new voices. I mean you even think about how Morrison gives a slave like Margaret Garner a voice in *Beloved*. So, you might say that this was the step before, because we had the raw material in the slave narratives. We no longer began to see slavery as that thing which took away all of what black people had with them in Africa. It made them into African Americans, yes.*

HOST: These are some of the voices that are still too often overlooked, stories that the Writers' Project brought to the spotlight. Even at the time, the work was recognized as invaluable. Listen to this 1939 clip from the Library of Congress.

[Archival from Library of Congress]

LOC REPRESENTATIVE (ARCHIVAL): *It would really seem that we've finally grown up as a nation that we can spend a day recording such folklore as we have heard today. Personally, my greatest interest is in the Negro folklore and how justly proud we all are of one Zora Hurston, whose fine invariability and wealth of experience has made our recordings possible today.*

HOST: In 1942, Hurston published her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*. In the memoir, she retraces her whole life, but interestingly leaves out one part of her journey: her time gathering stories in Florida for the Federal Writers' Project, just a few years before. It's like she erased it. It's strange because that work was recognized as important even at the time. Why would she leave it out? Was it the shame of a welfare job? Or was it the cloud of controversy that hung over the Writers' Project for years after? She never said, and we may never know.

But Hurston's life did take a downward turn after her work on the Project and the success of *Dust Tracks on a Road*. She found it harder and harder to get published as America's literary tastes changed. In the 1943 radio interview with Mary Margaret McBride, Hurston touched on how she handled life's disappointments.

[Archival from the Mary Margaret McBride Show from the Library of Congress]

MARY MARGARET MCBRIDE (ARCHIVAL): *There was a little saying that you have in the book. What was it? She said, "No matter how good the music, you can't dance on every step."*

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): *Yes.*

MARY MARGARET MCBRIDE (ARCHIVAL): *Meaning you can't have everything.*

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): *That's right. And I knew that my hardships would be over. And I had gotten command of my life. I had found out, I suppose, how to live so that life couldn't defeat me so often anymore.*

MARY MARGARET MCBRIDE (ARCHIVAL): *And hurt you so much.*

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): *And hurt me so much.*

MARY MARGARET MCBRIDE (ARCHIVAL): *So, life hurt you up to the end?*

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): *Oh, it always will. You just have to accept that and not beef about it.*

HOST: For someone who proved so important to preserving other people's stories, Zora Neale Hurston nearly had her own story lost to history. By the late 1950s, Hurston was living in relative obscurity, sometimes working as a substitute teacher or a maid. She died in January 1960, penniless and was buried in an unmarked grave.

Flo Turcotte manages the Hurston archives at the University of Florida.

FLO TURCOTTE: *When Zora Neale Hurston died, she was considered indigent and a ward of the county because of her poverty and because of her ill health. When she passed away, the county decreed that all of her effects were to be destroyed. So literally everything that she had was put into a burn barrel and lit afire.*

The sheriff's deputy named Patrick Duval saw the fire going in the burn barrel outside her residence and literally put a hose in the burn barrel and extinguished the flames.

The Zora Neale Hurston papers are now the most heavily used literary manuscript collection in our archives.

HOST: Thanks to the quick thinking of deputy Patrick Duval, scholars, writers, and future generations have this critical resource to give them a better picture of Hurston.

About a decade after Hurston's death, novelist Alice Walker found her unmarked grave, and restored her cultural legacy. Hurston's book, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is ranked among the twentieth century's greatest novels. And her writing on folklore and culture has been reclaimed and republished.

TAMEKA HOBBS: *When I think of her, always, I think of someone who is a brave storyteller, and we appreciate her art as it ends up on page. But it is this work, this anthropological work, this seeking out, this her being an adventurer, that actually created the foundation for what we later get to enjoy. The ability of African Americans to be able to tell their stories, is of great interest. In some ways, we've gotten better at being able to capture the experiences and stories and voices of marginalized people.*

Knowing black history changed my life. It changed my orientation as an individual. It changed my orientation to my family. It helped me to know my place in history, and it changed my understanding of my place in this country.

HOST: The Florida Writers Project changed how we see history. It showed the value that Floridians gained from a full picture of their state: the noble, the outrageous, and the nasty. Historians and travelers still pore through the Florida guidebook and the life stories the Project's staff documented. We may never know what Zora Neale Hurston thought of the picture of Florida the Writers' Project staff produced. But the work speaks for itself.

Next time on the People's Recorder: In the Midwest, an experiment with language opens an opportunity for indigenous communities, and they see a path to renewal. And it brings its own pushback.

This episode of The People's Recorder was brought to you with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Florida Humanities and the Stetson Kennedy Foundation. The episode was produced by Spark Media and includes original audio from the Library of Congress and the Mary Margaret McBride Estate. The episode also features music recorded by the Florida Folklife Program and released on Drop on Down in Florida and original music by Ernest Toole.

Follow us on social media at @peoplesrecorder for more information and bonus content. I'm Chris Haley. Thanks for listening.