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# PEOPLE YOU SHOULD KNOW

By BUDDY SAMPSON



## JAMES E. HURD, JR.



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There are many stories in the rich history of African-American culture that haven't been told, stories that document the struggles and successes of a people, not defined by American history books. A gripping short film, "Poet of the Swingin' Blade" and a play, "Turpentine Jake" chronicles one of those stories, further enriching the annals of civilization. It is the story of James E. Hurd, Jr.'s grandfather and the turpentine industry, one of many accounts of Black history that have never been told.

Hurd Jr., from Wewahitchka, a small town near Panama City, Florida was fascinated by the stories that his grandfather, Jake Hurd, told him as a child. He has rich memories of his town, a town he affectionately calls "Wewa." "It was a small town where everyone knew everyone and I grew up on a farm," said James E. Hurd Jr. "The farm was about three miles from a river and about a quarter of a mile from a lake, so I grew up fishing and hunting and doing all the things a kid would do on a farm. And my grandfather had hogs and chickens and grew vegetables and stuff, so I learned early on at what the full cycle of life was about."

Hurd's grandfather, Jake, as many strong grandfather figures, offered wise counsel that helped to shape young Hurd Jr.'s adult life. Jake Hurd, who was born in 1887, regaled young James, who lived with his grandfather and grandmother from the age of three to the age of seventeen, with tales of slavery and the burgeoning turpentine industry. "My grandfather's parents were slaves," said Hurd. "His (grandfather Jake Hurd's) father was 14 or 15 years old when slavery was abolished in 1865."

"Turpentine Jake" and "Poet of the Swingin' Blade" were written by James E. Hurd, Jr. and Linda Bannister. "James always wanted to do something on his grandfather," said Linda Bannister. "And when he told me about the turpentine industry from his grandfather's perspective, I hadn't heard of it." The turpentine industry had debt peonage, that effectively enslaved people up until the 1970's. "It was brutal," said Bannister. "These people were lynched, they were beaten, the woods riders would go out in the woods after the turpentiners if they were trying to get away or if they weren't working up to what the White boss thought was appropriate. They would beat them with whips or even shoot them." The play and film details a chapter in the annals of African American history that has not been previously revealed. "There was an impetus to educate people about a piece of American history that was lost," said Bannister.

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There was a tremendous amount of research involved for the project, a true labor of love. Hurd, Jr. and Bannister spent many nights burning the midnight oil, going over old newspaper articles, accounts and books. They also garnered hundreds of interviews in order to obtain an accurate portrayal of Jake Hurd and the turpentine industry. "We talked to people who were still alive who had worked in the camps and with James' grandfather," said Bannister of the interviews, with some interview subjects up to 100 years of age. "It's a network of stories between these people. Jake is a folk hero, a legend."

James E. Hurd, Jr. is no stranger to the entertainment industry. He's worked on several popular productions, such as "Batman," "Murder She Wrote," "Sneakers" and "Like Mike." "Whatever you would see and hear, we would make the environment for that," said Hurd Jr. "We did Mr. Freeze's Ice Palace on Batman. It was a whole crew of us, but we did that stuff."

"Poet of a Swingin' Blade and "Turpentine Jake" will be presented at Stage 52, located at 5299 W. Washington Blvd. near Redondo on December 5, 2006. For tickets and information, call (323) 549-9026. African American history, although

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portrayed in movies, documentaries and books, still has many accounts to be told. Be sure to check out the screening on December 5. Witness an unheralded report of a piece of history that should be spotlighted.

James E. Hurd, Jr. is definitely one of the People You Should Know