

The Traveling Beekeeper



Road Travel Log: Ohio-October 2006

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Wicwas Press
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Over the past several years I've dramatically increased my travel to beekeeping meetings and visits with beekeepers. Lately a majority of these travels have been by car, since I make my living as a book publisher specializing in bee books and lecturing on a wide range of topics on bees and beekeeping. While air travel is a possibility, it is often no faster, and the logistics of multiple meetings and shipping books can be both exasperating and expensive. And while I love to fly, I just simply hate airports, especially now with all the new security rules and restrictions. From airport parking to walking onto the plane, I feel like I am given an ear tag and prodded along long fences and into holding pens.

So, it is no wonder why I drive to so many bee meetings. This gives me a chance to see the countryside and visit beekeepers I could never visit if I flew to a meeting, ensconced inside a hotel room, to speak at the meeting, and then flew home. I've done that; there are cities I have visited that I have never seen by the light of day. I flew in at night and stayed inside the motel complex and was kept hidden in the bowels of some convention center unable to see the view, much less any beekeeping.

When I visit a beekeeping operation, it is rarely the equipment or beehives that I find interesting. Yes, I notice the cleanliness or lack thereof, the natural smells of wood and wax and offensive odors (fermentation, mold and foulbrood), and equipment piled in back—you can tell a great deal about a beekeeper's style of management by looking at the area around the honey house. What is important when I visit a beekeeper is to discover the way he or she keeps colonies, collects and harvests the crop and what he/she decides to do with it, to sell it at wholesale or to find some clever way to market and sell the product themselves. The sheer diversity in

honey marketing and different approaches to making money with beekeeping is exciting to see in this country. Always I am interested in beekeepers' fine-tuning of their product, label and service to fill the needs of the local honey market, and how some find specialized markets for completely new products. There is usually a family dynamic to see as well—does the beekeeper include the family in the production, harvesting and marketing of the crop? Are the kids and grandkids involved? Or is the beekeeping a solo gig?

The longest distance I have ever driven to a beekeeping meeting was to attend the 1999 Apimondia meeting in Vancouver, British Columbia. Leaving from Connecticut, I was able to visit family and friends on the way to and from the meeting. By 2005 my travel plans had evolved into several mega-trips each year with multiple speaking engagements and book-selling opportunities in a number of states for each trip. It increased my chance of visiting beekeepers on their own turf to see how they did things and try to understand the mental processes that took them to these choices. While it often resulted in my sleeping (or trying to sleep) in 20 beds in 30 nights, it was a fascinating opportunity.

I keep notes and records of my travel, but rarely write a diary of the events as they happen. When I drive I am in way too much of a hurry to get somewhere (something I am trying to change), and at the end of a 12-16 hour, 500-700 mile day of hard pavement, I am too just tired and frazzled to sit at a computer or a sheet of paper and write. But during those hours at the wheel I am able to think and analyze some of the things I have seen, and pull out comparisons and differences from place to place, mostly I value the experiences I find when I visit beekeepers. I try to limit my taking notes while traveling at high speeds.

The people who keep my interest high

are the sideliners, the commercial operators and the dedicated hobbyists who help organize the meetings and invite me into the apiaries and their homes. They almost always share what they do in a frank and open manner. I rarely get the feeling they are trying to hide anything.

So now I will attempt to summarize these experiences in a series of articles about my travels. During my travels I sample the mood and practices of an industry undergoing rapid evolution under the combined pressures of almond pollination, varroa mites, small hive beetles, African bees and low honey prices. These, added to the general flux of the U.S. economy in the middle of the first decade of the new millennium, create some interesting observations and stories. Looking back over past bee publications, I know how rare it is to have articles that deal with the day-to-day reality of beekeeping.

I start with my most recent trip, an October-November 2006 outing where I steered my car toward Ohio, Kentucky, Missouri and Texas and added 5097 miles to the car and my body. I had scheduled a dozen talks and a workshop in five venues. The fall colors had not yet reached peak when I left New Haven. It rained hard well into Pennsylvania where I spent the first night on the road at the home of my niece and her family on the PA-OH line. That gave me time for family visits and a relaxed drive to Columbus, where I was set to speak at the Central Ohio Beekeepers Association on the Ohio State University Campus.

This was an important connection for me to make because of the meeting location. From 1972-1976 I worked as Extension Entomologist in Apiculture at The Ohio State University, and for 30 years I had not returned to the campus. It was not a planned avoidance, and I had

been back to the state of Ohio dozens of times. But to mark the event, I promised myself I would take a few minutes to drive around the campus and try to find a few old haunts and offices, even though I knew most were probably unrecognizable due to removal and renovation. While I hoped to marvel at all the changes, my car had different plans, and the right front axle boot flailed against the brake line, so when I touched the brake to turn onto 315 off the Columbus beltway, the brake pedal went to the floor. Fortunately, there was enough residual fluid in the brake lines to coax the car to the meeting site and then to the motel. The meeting went well, but I shared my car issue with the local beekeepers and one man stepped forward to help me out. We knew each other and I knew him to be a helpful person. I was about to find out how helpful he would be. The man was Dana Stahlman.

Dana Stahlman, Blacklick, Ohio.

I've known Dana Stahlman for a number of years, speaking to him at other meetings: the Ohio State Beekeepers Association (he was past treasurer and was just elected vice president), the huge Tri-County meeting held at OSU-OARDC, Wooster every year (Dana was also a used book dealer), and as a speaker at the Connecticut Beekeepers Association in June of 2006. While Dana and I had spoken at meetings, we later agreed that neither of us considered each other friends, just friendly acquaintances. My car's axle and brake line changed that dramatically.

Dana is a life-long beekeeper. His grandfather and father were beekeepers, as were his uncles. Dana owned his own bees when he was a teenager, and he has kept up to 600 colonies along his career. But he also earned a college degree, worked in the Ford Motor plant in Lima, Ohio near where he grew up, and worked as a teacher and eventually a high school administrator in Delaware, Ohio. He retired from that



Dana Stahlman, Blacklick, Ohio beekeeper with a bee hive from his collection. This is the Nonpariel hive. Stahlman was just elected vice president of the Ohio State Beekeepers Association and will be in charge of a committee dealing with Ohio queen rearing for that organization.

position after a full career and somehow found himself with 600 colonies of bees and a queen rearing operation in Central Ohio. He moved bees to Georgia for buildup, increase and queen rearing each year.

Now Dana is nearly retired from beekeeping, hoping to gear down to 10 colonies (so he thinks), from a career total of 600 colonies that he ran primarily by himself. He has had two bouts with cancer, and now spends time with two grandchildren who are part of his beekeeping activities.

Giving back time

Dana Stahlman willingly admits that he has reached the giving back time of his life. His grandchildren, Ian and Katie, help him with the bees and with honey sales at a local market, selling honey jars clearly labeled so customers know that Grandpa is helping his grandkids with their college funds by selling honey. It's a great approach to honey marketing since the kids are knowledgeable about bees (thanks to a lifetime of careful instruction by an instinctive teacher/grandfather). Whether inherited or carefully taught, the kids are excellent honey marketers when at a booth at the local farm market. Ian tells his grandfather that they sell more honey when he is not around, so Dana is relegated to being gofer and being a watchful but distant supervisor for the kids as they interact with the crowd. They make an impressive team, with Katie's clear head, Ian's enthusiasm and Grandpa's high-energy support.

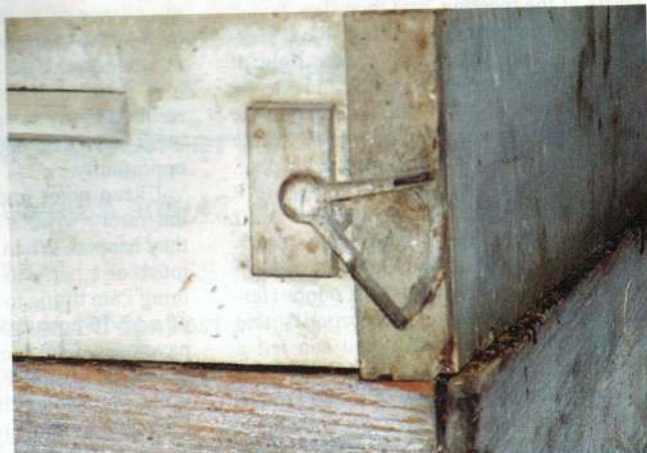
The giving back part was reflected in Dana and his wife, Mary, providing me with countless kindnesses including a bed to sleep in, meals, a place to set up my laptop and work, as well as laundry service. I admit I allowed myself to be spoiled since it worked well for me and we all three were having a very comfortable time together talking bees, kids and politics. The car repair was delayed by the lack of parts in Columbus. While the beast I drive carries a Japanese nameplate, it was manufactured in Illinois and I still think the dealer just kept forgetting to place the order for the parts, keeping me at the Stahlman's. We all accepted this fate!

Kentucky

The next meeting on my schedule was in Frankfort Kentucky, home of the University of Kentucky and the Dr. Tom Webster's research and extension beekeeping program. The University will be the site of the 2007 Heartland Beekeepers Association meeting in July, so it is always



V-notched frame rests on the top bars of the Nonpariel hive. Note the nails used as frame spacers by the maker of this hive.



The Nonpariel used a basswood section comb in a box that could be side-loaded and tightened. The system designed to tighten the box together is shown here.

nice to see the venue before the meeting.

When I mentioned renting a car to drive myself to the meeting Dana would hear nothing of it. He told me that he would drive me to the meeting, and that he would pay for gas and it was not negotiable. He even insisted he drive—to give me a break. So, we loaded my stuff into his car and we headed for Kentucky. Over the three-hour drive I learned about Dana's prior driving history, moving bees from Ohio to Georgia for spring buildup, and then back again. Sometimes he used the rolled up moving screen as a mattress in his travels. He knew where the good truck stops were on the way to and from the Kentucky meeting—especially one he had used to meet beekeepers who had ordered bees from him in years past. Many new truck stops have gone the way of McDonalds in this country, and the old, independent ones are harder to find.

The Kentucky meeting was held at the university agricultural farm where Tom Webster keeps bees (although no hive work was scheduled). The meeting room was packed with beekeepers, with a few standing in the back. It was a pretty exciting meeting and I was happy to introduce my "driver" with his tremendous beekeeping credentials. During the beekeeping meeting I watched Dana as he listened to the Kentucky beekeepers discuss their various programs and activities. I know he was making mental notes to take back to Ohio and to share with the beekeepers there. It was the spring-board for our conversations on the way back to Blacklick on a beautiful, bright Saturday afternoon. Dana kept thanking me for letting him come along to the meeting in Kentucky—he felt he has gained so much by attending this meeting. "And it was only three hours away," he kept saying. This was an experience that he would have been missed if it had not been for my car's busted axle boot.

Beekeeping Books and Literature

As a book publisher I often sell used beekeeping books. I don't go looking for them (unless someone asks)—they seem to find me when folks want to sell a collection rather than see it end up in a landfill. Before I left for this trip I had a plea from an old friend to please, please stop by and pick up his books and help him sell them. It was Tom Ross, the founder of Ross Rounds plastic round sections. Ross sold his business a few years ago and was officially retired. Health issues had forced him to get rid of his last hive of bees and it was time to think about moving into a more manageable sized home. When I departed Tom's home, our collective supply of bee books and literature filled every inch of my poor car and he was delighted to get them out of his house.

Tom Ross and I go back to my Ohio State days, 1972-1976, and it was during that time that Tom corresponded with Richard Taylor, author of a number of bee-



Tom and Carol Ross in their backyard in Massillon, Ohio on a cool October day when I started my road trip. The dog's name is Halley.

keeping books, especially *The Joys of Beekeeping*, and a frequent contributor in *Bee Culture*. Richard told Tom about a medical doctor near Detroit who had this really slick method of producing section honey in round plastic sections. So, about 1975 Tom placed an order for the sections for his colonies and other beekeepers, but did not get the shipment from the doctor. After some negotiating he received permission to produce the plastic sections himself and Ross Rounds was founded.

It would be curious to know how many thousands of boxes of Ross Rounds Tom has mailed to bee clubs as samples to give away at meetings. Tom was always a professional and extremely generous with beekeepers. A successful architect in Massillon, Ohio, Tom focused his beekeeping energy into the development of the plastic sections. In most parts of the country the Ross Rounds are the standard section honey container. While some of the old basswood sections persist in a few areas, it is usually hard to find them in most markets. His generosity to bee clubs

put the equipment into the hands of beekeepers willing to give the equipment a try, and this eventually was successful in a complete shift in the production of comb honey in most of the world.

Like the roads I drive to these meetings, life gives us mile markers. There are valued beekeeper friendships that grow and develop as you travel to these different meetings. When I am introduced as someone who has "forgotten more than we will ever know"—and that happens more and more—I think of the high quality people Tom Ross and Dana Stahlman—important names to recall and men still active in the trade. If you can convince either of these two men to visit your bee club and speak, or put them in charge of a workshop, I am sure you will be impressed by their passion about beekeeping, personal integrity and their generosity of spirit.

Dr. Larry Connor may be reached on the Internet at eebooks@aol.com, or at a meeting when he is on his next road trip.

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