

The Traveling Beekeeper



Buzzing Along in Early Retirement

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It was 1973. The City of North Olmsted, Ohio had just purchased an apple orchard with a hive of bees and wanted it removed. Nobody was interested in the bees except a paramedic named Buzz Riopelle. He got the bees delivered "on a back hoe, and we transferred the hive to my pickup. We were in front of the fire hall, and all the guys were standing behind the glass doors of the building. I popped the hive to see if there were any bees alive, and out they flew. All the guys were laughing at me. But it was about five degrees out so the bees didn't fly very long. That was how I got my start with bees and beekeeping."

Buzz (his father's name for him before he was born when his parents picked the name Russell) lives with his wife Nancy on a well-tended property in Valley City, a Medina County, Ohio, bedroom community of Cleveland. It is an area of diverse farms with black locust, basswood and other floral sources. Medina County is rapidly becoming the place to live if you work in Cleveland, and the houses, including former farm fields of uniformly beige McMansions, are being developed throughout the region. On Buzz's property there is a farm pond filled with pretty fish, a huge bear carved out of an old log, and the front of his honey house has gas pumps from the past. Every time I visit, I am greeted by very large, very friendly dog that insists he lick the crumbs on the floor of my car before I have a chance to get out! Buzz has an extensive collection of mouse and rat traps, but you better be interested and have time if you ask to see them, since he WILL show you every trap in the large collection. He took retirement after putting in his years with the fire department, and keeps about fifty hives of bees "when they survive".

"Why do you stay with bees," I asked, wondering if the money in retirement was the motivation.

"Money?" replied Nancy Rippole, her tone making it very clear that that was the

very last thing that motivated her husband.

"It's not the money," Buzz laughed. "It's always varied, and the bees keep it interesting. Like many people say, if you make \$1,000 in beekeeping, you could easily make \$2,000 doing just about anything else. So it's NOT the money. What I like about it is that everyone you run into is fascinated about bees, and they want to know more. So you can be very knowledgeable about bees, and people listen—all people listen. People are fascinated by bees."

When I asked who does what in the "bee" business, Nancy said that she does not do much, but she does do the candles. She sets up in the garage (not the honey house) and works behind closed doors after the bees discover the odor of hot wax. "I always seem to pick a day that is 95 degrees do the wax molding," she said. They tried dipped candles, and she and Buzz set up a huge production system, complete with three sets of dipping boards. But they did not sell. Now Nancy focuses on molded candles, including some "stick" candles—the mold for which she made after watching it done on Martha Stewart. Those and the molded beehive, pinecone, and other standard forms are best sellers.

Nancy also handles the financial records, edits and mails the Medina Co. Beekeeper's Newsletter, and with Buzz she stores, cleans, delivers, sets up and

supervises the club's honey sales at the week-long Medina County Fair. Beekeepers are encouraged to work three shifts so they can sell their honey there, and the club takes a 20% cut.

Buzz and Nancy sell honey at local festivals and through farm markets and one supermarket. The two festivals are Pioneer Days, where folks dress up, demonstrate crafts and put on an educational event. They also supply honey for six farm markets and one very upscale grocery store. They turned down an offer to expand into a grocery store network when a local market became part of chain—they did not feel they had the honey to support the demand. They also dropped three health food stores because of price. The stores were unwilling to pay the same as the trendy market in Akron that attracts an upscale customer base. Now Buzz feels he is competing with imported white truffle infused honey that sells for \$25 for 4.5 ounces. He clearly likes that sort of competition, and has no trouble selling the honey his bees produce. And if it is not his bee's honey, he doesn't want to sell it.

Buzz takes the time to separate his honey crop into three flows: Spring Tree Honey (removed after basswood and catalpa are over), Wildflower Honey (removed before Goldenrod starts) and Goldenrod. The last honey of the year, which includes



L: Extracting setup: Background shows uncapper, and sump pump. The honey filter in the foreground is suspended from the ceiling by chain link. This is the most Buzz does to process any of his honey. Some is not filtered at all! Note the ribbons on the back wall for honey shows Buzz has won since starting bees in 1973. R: Mesh filter drains into buckets for storage.

a long aster flow, is left for the bees.

While all his honey is liquid, he prepares a product that is “not heated, not filtered.” He puts on a warning label that the produce may contain “pollen, propolis and bee parts.” He picks out the whole bees. This product granulates quickly and demands a premium price in his markets. He finds no resistance to the bee parts in the honey—it is explained on the label—and buyers seek it out.

It was hard to pin Buzz down on the amount of time he spends in honey marketing, but he decided that the entire process, from bottling to delivery, takes up about 7-8 hrs/week during the busier summer months, and about 5 hrs per week during the winter. His bee work takes between 40 to 60 hrs a week during the spring and summer, and maybe one hour per week in the winter. Both Buzz and Nancy volunteer as ski patrol members at local ski slopes, and take ski vacations.

They also have a boat that they have put into Lake Erie. It's called “Honey Money” as an inside joke, since “not a penny” of real honey money was spent on the craft. They purchased it in 1987, and try to get to the boat during the summer to get away. They are shown on the boat on the cover photo of the Sept. 2000 *Bee Culture* Magazine.

We then got into a long conversation about HIDI (How I Do It).

New Colonies: Buzz uses both packages and splits to maintain a colony count of about 50. He figures that he loses about 25-30% of the colonies every year from the combined effect of varroa mites, starvation and poor beekeeping conditions. Early last September he saw his colonies get smaller and smaller, and bees leave colonies. He found them on the driveway, just sitting there, leaving the queen with a few workers behind in the colony. This is one of the symptoms associated with Colony Collapse Disorder.

A former county bee inspector in Ohio,

Buzz knows to look for disease and tracheal/varroa mites, and tests for all of them. He has had no direct diseases other than parasitic mite syndrome (PMS) and European foulbrood and chalkbrood associated with that syndrome. In the field, he is a stickler for sanitation, washing the hive tool, smoker surfaces, and his hands with soap and water and/or rubbing alcohol.

He makes nucs with three or four frames of brood and a swarm cell on one of the frames. He has also grafted queens with success—this is his major effort at swarm control.

2006 was an extremely poor year for Buzz and his bees. It was hot and dry and there was little nectar production with no tree bloom (apple, tulip, basswood, catalpa). The summer was hot and there was a poor fall flow. He fed colonies in the winter, something he ordinarily does not feel he has to do when colonies fill up with the fall aster flow. Small colonies survived until April, when a deep freeze from a cold snap killed fruit blossoms and killed the small hives.

Swarm Management: Last year Buzz raised queens and used swarm cells for colony increase. He routinely takes two frames of brood and bees from each colony, yet many of these colonies still swarm. Over the season, he figures nearly every large colony ends up swarming. That includes new colonies from packages (if the queen takes), and from increase colonies made up the same season if they get big. He gets swarms all season—at different times of the year—well into September.

Queens: Buzz blames queens for many of his problems. He recently purchased queens from Hawaii that he felt were very poorly produced, calling them rat-tailed queens. About 25% of the shipment was like that, and had low introduction success and supersedure within a month.

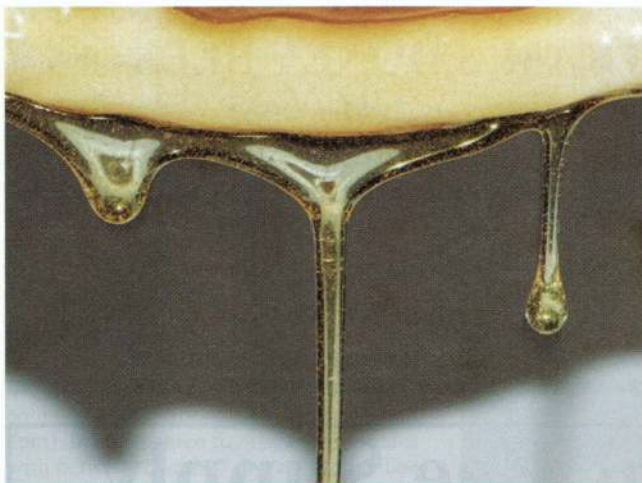
In 2006, working with the Medina

County Beekeepers, I conducted two queen rearing classes using Buzz's bees and facilities. About 25 local beekeepers participated. Afterwards Nancy said that Buzz was obsessed with raising his own queens, and was successful at doing it. But it was a bad year for bees, in general, and the new colonies required feeding. Still, Buzz is focused on summer production of queens and making up nucleus colonies going into the winter.

Queen Introduction: When Buzz replaces a queen in a colony, or makes up a nucleus, he makes sure capped brood is present, and kills the old queen (having already determined the queen is failing). He de-queens and re-queens all in one hive visit. He uses the three-hole shipping cage and feels that it takes three to four days to release the queen. He waits another 3-4 days to check to see if the queen is out of the cage (this reduces the amount of cross comb the bees build). He runs between 90-95% queen introduction success with all but the Russian stock. With the Russian he is unable to achieve more than 50% of the queens safely introduced, using the same methods.

Mite control: Buzz has watched the mites spread into his bees, so he has tried many chemical control methods. Now he uses Formic Acid in the blue pad (Miteaway II), and feels it is “as good as anything else.” He likes the ease of use, and the single treatment. He applies the material in mid to late September, after he has removed the final honey crop, and while the colonies are still working the aster flowers.

Buzz keeps a screened bottom board on every colony in his operation, and he uses a piece of floor tile to close off the screen during the winter. He removes them in March or April when the weather is warm enough and is able to clean the tiles and store them for the next fall, about the time the mice are ready to move into the colonies. That way he puts the entrance



Honey Dripping from the mesh filter into the buckets below.



Insulated sump holds honey so it may be pumped into the buckets a few at a time.

reducers and the floor tile into the hive during the same visit.

Whenever one of his colonies show six or more varroa mites on drone brood, Buzz treats—using Sucrocide or formic acid, depending on time and the nectar crop.

These mite control methods help, but do not eliminate the loss of colonies from mites. With an overall loss of 30% every year, he figures mites contributed to the loss, perhaps half. He sees a large amount of chalk brood associated with varroa mite populations, and feels that this results in death of the colonies due to a combined parasite and disease stress. He does not treat for AFB preventatively.

Buzz does not have American foulbrood in his colonies, but he knows it is in the county. He estimates that there are 20-30 beekeepers within ten miles of his home, and there is always the risk of foulbrood on top of everything else. He attributes the large number of beekeepers in the Medina area to Kim Flottum of the Root Company, and the Medina County Beekeepers. The Root Company (publisher of *Bee Culture* Magazine, that Kim edits) allows the local bee club to use their facilities for meetings, bee schools and the club apiary.

Records: Buzz keeps a small notebook and records everything. He considers this one of his strongest traits as a bee manager. This provides a complete summary of queen, feed and treatment information. For financial reporting, he keeps data for the Ohio Dept. of Agriculture and provides production records for them. He also keeps good financial records (Nancy does the taxes—after all, she was a tax analyst for a national tax collection agency). Nancy added that one of the Medina club's biggest problems has been full compliance with the Ohio State taxes because of sale of non-honey items at the fair. Finding someone willing to do the paperwork to comply with state law has recently been solved with a new volunteer.

Labels: When he started with bees, Buzz traded a hive for artwork for his label. He has since added only one item to

the label: "Home Produced." He sells 12 oz bears, 1-, 2- and 5-pound containers. He does no bulk or larger container.

Production: "This is agriculture" Buzz laments, saying that he had 120 pounds per colony in 2004 and only 20 pounds per colony in 2006.

Strongest part of his management: Buzz feels he has excellent records and runs a very clean operation. He is proud that his honey is not contaminated with chemicals or any form of insecticides.

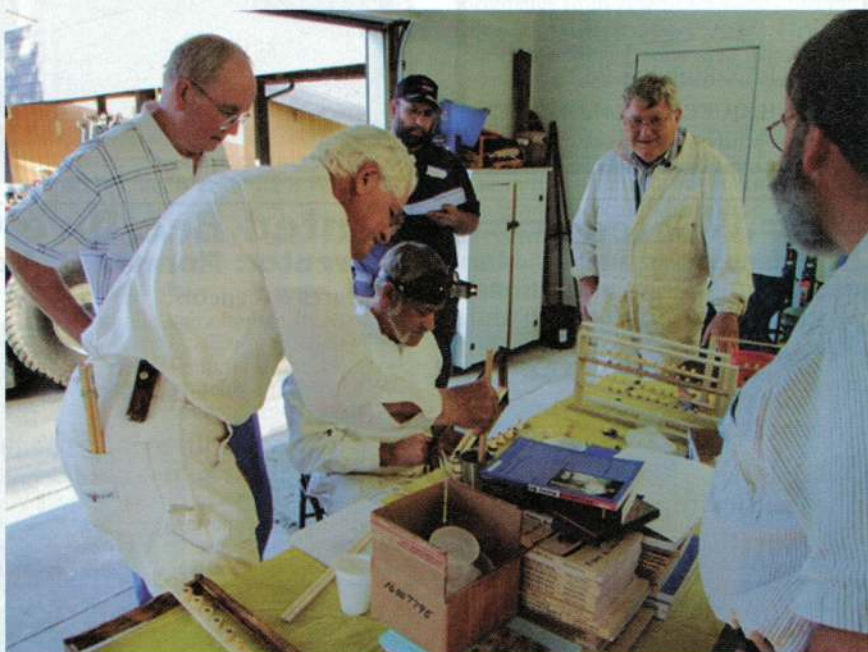
Where he needs to improve: "I want to get more than fifty to seventy-five cents an hour for my labor," Buzz said. Nancy disagreed. "Ten cents," she said. They both admit that the bees keep Buzz occupied,

something he needs or he starts to crawl up the walls.

He feels he needs to work on getting better acceptance of queens, a problem that plagues him, especially with the Russian stock.

Final quote: "When you are wearing a full bee suit at eighty degrees and the sweat is running in your eyes—it's work."

Note: you can't see his face, but Buzz appears in a bee suit on the cover of the new 41st edition of *ABX and XYC of Bee Culture*. Both he and Nancy were "bee-keeper and hand models" for the photos inside the book, a result of being friends with the book's editor.



Buzz Riopelle is seated at the table grafting larvae during a queen rearing course offered in conjunction with the Medina County Beekeepers Association in June 2006. This garage stores some of Buzz and Nancy's collections of antique signs, motorcycles and is where Nancy makes beeswax candles.