

The Traveling Beekeeper



MIGRO-BEEKEEPING: DIVERSITY IN SAN FRANCISCO

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Travel in the summer 2009 took me to the three regional apicultural society meetings: the Heartland Apicultural Society in Oberlin, OH the weekend after the 4th of July, the grand dame of summer conferences at the Eastern Apicultural Society in Ellicottsville, NY the first week of August, and the Western Apicultural Society meeting in Healdsburg, CA the third week of August. A number of folks were in attendance at two of these meetings, but I think I was the only person who was registered at all three. It was a first for me, and while I had a huge amount of fun, I was both physically drained but mentally exhilarated by the time WAS was finished.

It was a summer of firsts for me. I gave the opening talk at HAS in a huge and historic UCC Church in Oberlin and was then invited to end the week with a Sunday Sermon in that same space with a discussion on the Sacred Bee. At EAS I gave three official microscopy classes (plus one unofficial gathering needed to get the scopes all set up and the lab tested), along with three field sessions and a workshop. This freely demonstrates EAS's propensity towards speaker abuse, at least this one. Finally, at WAS, I conducted a special workshop for local Northern California beekeepers while the other WAS participants were off to wine country to test their enological skills.

Another high point was conducting a workshop the Saturday before WAS for the San Francisco Beekeepers Association. This was a special program introducing introductory queen rearing—not a full queen rearing course (we did not have time or hives available for that). It was not a huge crowd but more an ideally sized group considering the subject matter. This was a group filled with questions, all of them seem to be having a great time grilling the instructor.

San Francisco is an amazing and fun place because of its diversity of microclimates, neighborhoods and people. This is a huge

melting pot of ethnic groups and a pretty accepting area for differing life styles and sexual orientations. The president of the SFBA is Karen Peteros, a part-time lawyer and part-time beekeeper who is partnered with Janice, a physician assistant in heart transplant. They reflect the focus of the beekeepers I met in the Bay area—they live there by choice, and sometimes have to make compromises and sacrifice to afford to live in such an expensive city.

Peteros painted a vivid picture of the diversity of beekeeping in the San Francisco Bay Area. There are at least seven clubs in the region, perhaps the largest concentration of bee clubs in North America within such a small area. Yet they are all pretty independent of

each other. Within the city of San Francisco, an area roughly seven miles by seven miles in size, there are many microclimates and neighborhoods, often described as being either cool or warm based on the temperature, wind exposure, fog cover and other factors. At Karen's home she has not been able to get queens to mate from her nucleus colonies, but half a mile away, where it is warmer, she has had good luck getting virgins to mate, especially during the summer months. In the fall she can expect queens to mate when the weather pattern changes in the Bay area.

The San Francisco Beekeepers Association is experiencing the same urban growth of interest in beekeeping as seen in other cities around the world. There are many new mem-



San Francisco Beekeeper Association members have colonies on a platform at a neighborhood garden. Bees and beekeepers are openly welcomed in the City, and part of the Eat Local network.

bers in the club and the club's activities. Many are women, venting frustration over the bee supply manufacturer's lack of small gloves and way-too-heavy hive bodies. I think this is a significant shift in the focus of the beekeeping industry that few organizational leaders have added into their meeting planning agendas. It comes with some squabbles between beekeepers, especially the more experienced and the new upstarts. But the old timers need to bend a bit and the new leadership has to learn to be sensitive to their thinking. The residents of the city all benefit because there are now bee hives in nearly every corner of the city, and fruit trees, vegetables and food for wildlife optimally pollinated for the first time in years, if ever. The beekeepers have a potential income from selling nucleus hives and honey, plus all the hive products they can make from the honey, beeswax, propolis and other hive products.

San Francisco is cooled in the summer when the hot and dry weather of the central valley pulls in the cool, moist air from the Pacific Ocean, causing the fog famous around The Golden Gate Bridge. When the huge valley climate starts to cool in September, the refrigerator effect on the bay regions is reduced and the temperature in San Francisco increases. This means that SF summer is more like winter, but an early summer comes in the April and May and a late summer appears again in September and October. There are nectar flow peaks at both times.

Within that overall system, not all of the City is the same: one neighborhood may be defined by sun exposure, wind movement and



SFBA member Greg Davis keeps bees on the rooftop of his building. He is showing how to uncap a frame for a group of neighborhood children. After each kid has had a chance to turn the crank on the extractor, their parents will be taking home some tired kids!



Everyone who attends the Extracting Party gets a special jar of honey to remember the event.

the prevalence of fog. This has a direct impact on honey production. There are many flowers in the city, including a long list of plants that are usually house plants in most of the rest of the country. Some neighborhoods are too cool for cucumbers, but containers of many plants are on rooftops along with hives of bees. The thermal heat from dark roofs may make these sites desirable for plants and bees rather than creating an over-heating problem. We had a discussion with one beekeeper about the freedom from varroa mites on his black-tar roof. Maybe the heat is discouraging mite reproduction?

Beekeepers in San Francisco have copied the gay and lesbian population—instead of hiding their bee activities, many of them are out and proud to be beekeepers. Lot sizes in much of the city are tiny. The average building lot is 25 feet wide and 100 feet deep, leaving little room for a backyard for many beehives. Overcrowding of hives is discouraged by the local bee clubs, but finding an open field is virtually impossible unless they leave the city and go to a warm neighborhood outside the City. SFBA president Peteros says that there are no restrictions on beekeeping in the city, at least when common sense and good neighbor policies are followed.

During my Saturday workshop the issues of being a good neighbor beekeeper came up a number of times. The biggest issue is swarming, and another is the water source bees choose to visit. As it turns out, the year 2009 was a huge year for swarming in the Bay region, and there was a lot of talk about bees getting away, catching swarms and removing bees from the sides of buildings. The density of the houses in the city means that there must be proper care taken to reduce the chance of accidental stinging events.

During the workshop we discussed the use of swarm cells as a method to make up new colonies, thus giving the beekeeper additional colonies to use or to sell to the exploding population of beekeepers in the region. Removal of several frames of brood and the adhering bees is a great method of making a nucleus, as well as reducing swarming. I described a method used by some beekeepers in which the entire colony is disassembled into nuclei hives. The process is pretty simple: nucleus hives or regular equipment is arranged in a circle

around the original hive, all facing inward. The frames of brood, honey, pollen and empty comb are all evenly distributed to each of the new colonies, which range from three to six. For example, if a colony has 30 full frames, the beekeeper can make up six 5-frame nuclei hives from that one colony. When queen cells are present (usually in May in the Bay area, but earlier in some of the hot locations) the combs they are on are placed into each nuclei colony (that often determines the number that will be made).

When the splitting is all over, the beekeeper is able to pick up the original colony equipment and put it into storage, leaving the four to six hives in a circle. If one nucleus hive gets too many bees, its position can be switched with the weakest colony. By doing this all colonies will have an equal bee population and hopefully a new queen.

Keeping four to six nucleus hives in the city is not a problem, but keeping four to six full sized honey-producing colonies might be the upper limit for most of the small lots in San Francisco. The nice thing about five-frame nucs is that they can be easily screened and put in the back of the car or wagon and moved to another location or owner. We even discussed the possibility of moving bees on the back of a bicycle!

The possibilities are endless for Bay area beekeepers in terms of their bee sites due to the proliferation of community gardens and the Eat Local movement. The markets, the gardens and the passion for gardening in the city is extraordinary. Heirloom varieties, rare fruits (www.crfg.org) and beekeeping is part of that fabric, and the San Francisco Beekeepers have found, over the past few decades, places where their club members can keep a few colonies of bees. Vandalism has forced them to chain down the hives, a reaction to the misdirected teen activity and the desperation of the homeless that flock to San Francisco because of the mild climate. It is unfortunate, but if that is what is needed to keep bees locally, that is the way it is.

Extracting Party

Proof of the Out and Proud aspects of San Francisco beekeepers was the invitation to attend a Sunday afternoon Extracting party, hosted by beekeeping condo-neighbors, Greg



Bees in the City. SFBA treasurer Steven Cameron holds up a frame from one of the hives kept at a community garden. You can see the expressway and the city buildings in the background. One risk of this location is being hit by a tennis ball coming off the court at the top of the hill!



SFBA members Steven Cameron (L) and Karen Peteros (R) flank Cameo Woods, owner of the new store Her Majesty's Secret Beekeeper.



Cameo Wood at the counter of her new, very trendy, very airy store on a popular street in San Francisco. Cameo reports active honey sales and strong interest in beekeeping classes, taught at the store.

Davis and Sean and Tammy Volker, held on the Volker's balcony. Both are SFBA members. They co-own, with others, a building and keep bees on the roof of the building with a wonderful view of the city. The party, which included neighbors and friends, was an excuse for a great food and drink party on a wonderful (and rare) sunny summer afternoon. The adults took turns trying to get the uncapping knife warm enough to cut and not too hot to burn the honey. The kids took turns cranking the new three-frame Italian extractor.

As I left one of the bolts had loosened and fallen into the honey at the bottom of the extractor, and there was a discussion on the best way to deal with fishing it out. At the end of the day everyone who attended would get a special jar of honey marking the event. The two beekeepers had full support of all their neighbors and friends, and the bees, two floors above on the roof, were on enough of a nectar flow not to make the extracting party a disaster by starting to rob the honey back to the hives. There were stray bees, bee equipment and bee suits at the entrance of the building and on the steps going to the roof. Clearly, plenty of high-quality San Francisco honey had exchanged hands to make this possible.

HMS Beekeeper

Also that Sunday I was taken to a new store, Her Majesty's Secret Beekeeper, a retail bee supply and honey store in the city, claiming to be the first bee supply store in the city (in recent memory at least). It is a trendy, well designed store with the clutter in the back, and eye-catching displays in the front. Honey from San Francisco beekeepers is sold, often with a map of the neighborhood on the label, so locals buy from locals. A one pound jar of Karen's honey was being sold for \$24, and the demand had been extremely high. When you consider the income demographics of the people entering their store (often with a dog on leash, and there is a bowl of water for thirsty canine visitors), you realize that presentation,

marketing and local production create a unique demand for high-end products.

Cameo Wood, the owner of the store, is a skilled marketer, and she has relied on the talents of beekeepers like Karen to provide advice on what equipment to stock (they selected medium-depth frames for brood and supers both), and to provide classes at the store. Over 400 people have signed up for classes since the store opened in June. If even a quarter of them take a bee class, it will be a huge educational effort.

Karen took me into her back yard and said it was "Larry's Nuc Yard". She explained that she had read my book on *Increase Essentials* and also attended my lecture on the subject at the January 2008 joint ABF/AHPA meeting held in Sacramento. "I remember what you said, that the money in beekeeping is in the bees, not the honey." She proudly showed me a yard filled with nucleus hives she had made from colonies and had plans to sell them to students at Cameo's store. With strong five-frame nucleus hives getting as much as \$150 in this market, Karen was looking at return on her investment in beekeeping she had made over the past few years. She claims to be a student of Nuc-ology, one of several unique terms I heard during the visit (Another is the renaming of the Brushy Mountain 4-way Queen Castle to the "San Francisco Love Shack").

Sunday night SFBA treasurer Steven Cameron and I went bar-hopping in the Castro area of San Francisco's. It was a fitting end to a visit to an amazing and diverse city.

Dr. Connor will host 'Fun with Bees: A program on Value-Added Beekeeping' on October 10 in Comstock, Michigan. Check out www.wicwas.com for information. Then in November he will be in Texas and Connecticut. The same website has information on these meetings. You can also check out *Increase Essentials* (not yet renamed "The Complete Guide to Beekeeping Nuc-ology) and his new book, not yet released, on *Queen Rearing Essentials*.