

# The Traveling Beekeeper



## FORTY YEARS

by Dr. LARRY CONNOR

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Yesterday I hosted a 'master' class for seven relatively new beekeepers. We were reviewing some familiar territory—lighting the smoker, finding the queen, picking up and marking the queen, using the hive tool efficiently, equalizing colonies and a lot more. It reminded me of something a colleague said to me the first week of August, 1972.

Forty years ago I was a new associate professor in entomology extension at The Ohio State University in Columbus. After the first week of work, I got a phone call from a colleague from another department who had met me at a new faculty event for extension staff.

"So, how did the week go?" he asked.

I explained that there were some major events that seemed out of the ordinary for extension work, like the accidental death of pest control operator who decided to kill a nest of yellow jackets in a sun-baked and uninsulated attic using cyanide gas without thinking about the risk to himself. It was big news throughout the state, and I had received a few calls for comment.

"And routine phone calls and tons of mail, right?" he asked.

I said yes, especially a lot of mail. Each letter required a written reply on University stationary, with a carbon copy filed and kept forever.

"Just so you don't forget, you will be answering those same questions on the last day of your job years from now."

So true, 40 years later, and a long time out of University life, I am still answering the same questions for new beekeepers (I got rid of the pest control responsibilities some time back), and they do follow a familiar trend. There are few items that come by mail, but lots of email requests about articles I write. And cell phone calls, which apparently relieve the caller of any responsibility of looking to see what time it is where they are calling.

That first week in August 1972 my daugh-

ter was just three months old, and now she works as an pediatric intensive care nurse in Anchorage while raising her 2-year-old. My son, born in 1975 in Columbus, is in his first year of beekeeping here in Michigan, something I never expected. But there he was yesterday, making his dad proud. Yesterday he helped with the master class as well as listened to me work with the students. I still instinctively ask to have the hive tool to show a simple way to use it for more effective colony management.

But most of the class was based on the students working a hive with smoker and hive tool, and I was there to help, as were the rest of the other students. If you have never seen your queen in a colony, every drone is a suspect. If you are not sure if a colony has eggs, time must be spent to help

the students see the eggs, with their back to the sun and getting the light down into the cells.

As the instructor or teacher/trainer/mentor/coach, I know that beekeepers must work the hive themselves in order to gain confidence. If they have never had a small group field experience, it is pretty difficult for new beekeepers to work through all the different things they need to learn, by themselves, and even if they have read and will re-read my books and the words of others.

Things have changed, and they haven't.

Beekeeping experienced a strong growth period during the 1972-1976 period, fed by the young and young-at-heart hippie movement and others concerned about the importance of bees. There were young people, women, and young families at the meetings



Hawaii apiarist Danielle Downey at a queen rearing class taught near Hilo, Hawaii. Such classes bring a wide range of ages; male, female, young and "experienced".





**New beekeepers need help to see eggs and larvae. And a few who have kept bees for some time! Getting the sun behind you helps get the sunlight into the bottom of the cells where you can see the small eggs and the nearly transparent larvae.**

at local clubs in Ohio. There were urban beekeepers. In fact, I was once asked to 'comment' on a small-lot beekeeper who had 40+ colonies in his tiny city lot—boxes packed so tight you had to squeeze past them. The beekeeper was not a young hippie, but an old immigrant from eastern Europe, and he was trying to duplicate his homeland activity on a much smaller real estate footprint.

As the "love generation" got jobs, married, and moved around the country, many were forced to give up their bees and beekeeping. Not all, of course, as I have visited 'old hippie' farms in different parts of the country, where agricultural diversity and liv-

ing off the grid are standard practice.

Of the seven beekeepers in my class yesterday, four were women, one who keeps bees with her husband, also in attendance. Two of the men had kept bees in their teens or early adulthood and may have had colonies while I was at Ohio State. But college or whatever got into their way, and now they are back, keeping colonies again, trying to build and provide the proper husbandry for their bees that they grew fond of so many years ago.

The couple lives in Kalamazoo, and want to develop a sub-group of beekeepers keeping bees within the city limits, so this has

been added to my 'to do list'. There have always been urban beekeepers, quite often working out of sight of neighbors and 'officials'. I do not know of any restrictions against beekeeping in Kalamazoo as long as safe practices are followed and water is offered to the bees during hot weather.

Mites were unheard of in 1972, and so was climate change. People complained if they lost more than 15% of their colonies during the Michigan winter.

In July I visited my daughter and family in Alaska and we went to the Portage Glacier south of Anchorage. We got on the boat and traveled for some time to reach the glacier which has receded dramatically over the past few years. Back home my bees and fellow beekeepers were baking in 105+ degree heat for days in a row. Some argue that the summer of 2012 is the summer when people's opinion about climate change and global warming have shifted to deep concern, yet some of those 1970's hippies (and others) turned scientists have been documenting the shift in temperature patterns for decades.

Yesterday we discussed the impact of the early spring and summer in Michigan. The early March heat spell caused many plants to bloom early and the colonies built in number very quickly resulting in a record spring for swarms. The joke is "my swarm swarmed!" It makes it difficult for new beekeepers. Climate change means there will be a strong influence on plants that we rely upon for buildup and nectar.

We discussed the small hive beetles. I had them survive the winter in my hives, but they have not been very apparent during the hot weather. One could argue that the beetles do not like my apiary's exposed and dry location. Or you argue that the early spring was followed by nearly complete elimination by frost of fruit tree bloom that may provide alternate food and sugary carbohydrates for the beetles. Yet one of the students had a beetle attack, so maybe all these theories are just that, theories.

#### **Forty more**

It's fun and frightening to think about another 40 years of teaching beekeeping! I'm sure I'd need the help of my son and granddaughter to do some of the heavy lifting, but who knows what sorts of medical advances we may have during this time period. Technology has developed so much in the past 40 years—desktop computers were rare and mainframe linked only, no cell phones, no facebook, and little of the technical medical stuff that keeps many folks 'ticking'.

When I did some college teaching (introductory biology), biology textbooks discussed the earth's population growth and the impact of that growth on everyone. There does not seem to be much discussion about human population growth anymore, but growing human populations will have a double impact on beekeeping. First, there will be a huge pressure on beekeepers to provide bees for pollination for plants in areas that will otherwise not support a bee



**The small hive beetle larvae is crawling on a slimed frame of brood, pollen and honey. New beekeepers need to learn more than they did 40 years ago. Every indicator points to more problems in 40 more years, as the pressure for meeting honey bee pollination needs continues to grow with global human population growth.**



colony, like our current situation with almonds in California, but much more widespread. Like it or not, more and more bee colonies will be forced into feed-lot situations where protein and carbohydrates will keep colonies alive and at peak populations for pollination needs. A sidebar on this: borders will be forced open by growers and consumers to allow bees from many parts of the world to come in for pollination, increasing our number of pests and predators.

Second, areas of productive, chemically-neutral, and natural forage will most likely be limited to private or trust-land preserves set aside for sustainable agriculture, a premium priced program of providing food for those who have rejected mass-production agriculture. The need for healthy food will never lose its role in determining what a minority of producers are able to do, and get away with.

Whatever the hippies of 2052 may be called, they will not be a great deal different from the hippies of 1972 except in their ability to immediately communicate any where on the planet. This will create the possibility of some pretty amazing protests, able to shut down the world economy with a simple text message. I suspect their drive toward food sustainability will lead to a form of food elitism where only those with the land, the contacts and the money will be able to afford food that is not produced via industrial monoculture. We cannot minimize the role and impact of large chemical corporations who 'own' food groups likely to produce mass-produced foods containing trace chemicals with a wide range of sublethal, potentially synergistic, and largely undocumented effects on behavior of both bees and humans. All this may lead to major food wars, as the swelling human population seeks the healthy food controlled by the very few.

Then there will be water wars, in courts and on the streets of many countries, as areas of the country fight over fresh water rights. The states and provinces surrounding the Great Lakes will be bought off to drain off an inch or two of water from these fresh water treasures. This may be happening at the same time as the water level of the oceans is rising at a tremendous rate, changing the coastal cities and economic system.

Meanwhile, there will be new beekeepers, requiring answers to the questions I was asked in 1972 and 2012, as well as answers to questions about things we don't know thing about. That will change very little.

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