

SIDELINE BEEKEEPERS

Sideline beekeepers – Where do they fit into the fabric of the beekeeping industry in the United States? Who are these people and how can we best describe them?

For me, sideline beekeepers offer their own bees' honey for resale (and most often a lot of other hive products) and offer it for sale locally; a few offer their honey for sale via the Internet. They do not produce honey to put it into drums, but use five-gallon (60 lb) buckets to store and later process their honey. From the buckets they process honey for clarity (or not, in the case of some who sell "really raw honey", complete with bee parts and pollen), or make it into creamed honey, infused honey, or use some in cosmetic or health food products.

Sideline beekeepers are too big – have too much honey sales, too much income, or too much something – to be considered a hobby operation. Maybe they never were a hobby operation, but jumped into beekeeping with profit in their eyes from the very start. From an accounting perspective, a sideline beekeeper is one that seeks to make enough from his or her bees that they must keep detailed financial records and report income to taxing agencies, filing either schedule C (business) or F (farm) to report their beekeeping income and expenses. Since the Internal Revenue Service has its own rules for defining a business, I tend to avoid this aspect of describing the parameters of sideline beekeeper's activities. But I do know that the IRS requires hobby beekeepers to report income, but not expenses, from their bees. This differs for the sideline and commercial beekeeper – folks who are running the bees as a business, or at least trying to do so.

Our two national beekeeper associations consider sideline beekeepers as those that seek income and profit from their beekeeping activities. This differs from hobby or amateur beekeeping, where any financial income is minor and insignificant to the beekeeper. In the American Beekeeping Federation, Sideline Dues cover beekeepers who have 26 to 300 colonies. So, by their thinking if you have 25 colonies you are a hobby beekeeper, and if you have 301 colonies you are a commercial beekeeper. But there is little difference from a beekeeper owning 24 colonies, and one owning 25, or between 300 and 301. This is a self selected category anyway, and is not the result of an audit by the hive census committee ...

Here's a definition I like: *a sideline beekeeper is one that actively seeks income from bees, AND has another source of income.* This may be another job, retirement income, winnings from a lotto prize, or whatever. This means that a sideline beekeeper is under less pressure to turn a profit on everything they do. They can travel to meetings and participate in the leadership of local and state organizations because their beekeeping time is what they want to make of it. If they want to spend more time with bees, honey, beekeepers they can elect to do so. Or they can trim back drastically when something else comes along that peaks their interest.

Regardless of the number of colonies a person owns or the percentage of their working time they put into bees and beekeeping, it is clear that sideline

beekeepers are major participants in the diverse aspects of the craft. It is my opinion that they are the most rapidly growing part of beekeeping in the United States and control a critical part of the growth and success of national beekeeping.

They are not the most numerous beekeepers. There are more hobby beekeepers than sideline beekeepers, but the hobby group is very fluid, with perhaps a third to a half of them starting or restarting beekeeping every year. They start a hive or two, get involved with a local beekeeping club, but then the bees die for some reason. After a couple of times they give up for a bit, but may start another hive in a future year. We are seeing a growing number of hobby beekeepers who have just recently entered beekeeping because they want to help bees and overcome the decline in hive numbers as reported by the media this year. I applaud their efforts, but know that there will be a significant number who will lose interest after a year or two of tough beekeeping conditions, no honey crop, and dead bees.

There are, certainly more sideline beekeepers than commercial beekeepers. It is pretty clear to

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Where Do They Fit In?

Larry Connor

me that the number of commercial operations is shrinking while the number of colonies owned by each remaining commercial beekeeper is growing. We are entering the era of large corporate beekeeping, although they are often family-owned businesses. This provides stability to the honey production and pollination needs of the country. But these are barrel beekeepers, selling their product wholesale to industrial honey buyers. They are often migratory so are not often in one place long enough to become an important part of local associations fighting for legislation or funding needed by that particular state. They are, however, the beekeepers who write the large checks that support national beekeeping programs and agendas.

Besides honey production in all its diversity, sideline beekeepers generally provide pollination services for local growers, produce queens, nuclei and packages for local beekeepers, and provide a huge spread of bee hive products, from skin and beauty preparations to wax products, for local consumers. Generally these beekeepers sell their products at a price between wholesale and full retail, although many have learned that local means profitable, and sell their products at a premium price because they

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know that production is limited and consumer expectations are high. They have learned that buyers in some farm markets are not looking as much for a bargain as for local and fresh. With so many food groups tainted in the minds of the consumer with a possible link with China, the buyer is looking for local honey – honey produced in the same town or county as the farm market, and from a honey producer who can look them in the eye and say that they have never purchased any honey from outside the state.

So, you want to be a sideline beekeeper?

If you want to be serious about becoming a sideline beekeeper, there are two factors that you must consider: First you **MUST** be serious about keeping bees and making top quality honey and selling it for the maximum amount of money. One way to do this is to find local roadside farm markets where you sell your honey to the farmer/operator; or find a city or town sponsored farmers' market where you sell your honey yourself. The roadside market owner will want to purchase honey at the local wholesale rate and you can use this magazine's market report to get an idea how much honey sells for in your zone. A good thing about selling to a farmer's market is that once the honey is sold your job is done.

On the other hand, if you decide to rent a booth at a local farmer's market you need to look at the contract, evaluate the number of days you are required to be at the booth, be available for the hours of operation, and have enough product to supply the needs for this particular setup. The good news is that you have the right to charge whatever the local economy will support for your local honey. It may be different in different markets just a few miles apart because the buyers' perspectives about honey are different. Costs will add up: you will

have booth rental, the booth itself (purchased or constructed yourself), labor and the family cost in terms of lost soccer games, missed birthday parties, etc.

If you currently have five or 10 colonies, you need to develop a plan to grow to about a hundred colonies, the final number depending on your total time commitment and potential market. Perhaps you will decide to build up gradually, adding ten to twenty hives per year, and get into a comfortable place with each out-ary location and their owners. Or maybe someone has given you a golden offer, a series of locations to place your bees in safe and secure areas surrounded by great nectar sources. Maybe someone has offered you money to purchase equipment and bees to meet their pollination needs (this seems to happen more and more with the shortage of bees). So you may decide to jump in and get in over your head (as far as experience is involved) and hope you float upwards rather than sink to the bottom.

I tell folks new to beekeeping to find a mentor. The same advice holds true for a beekeeper who is trying to develop a sideline business. Outside of beekeeping you may be a teacher, an accountant, a fire fighter, a contractor, or a stay-at-home parent. You are probably very good at being a teacher, accountant, firefighter



Filling honey drums is what most commercial honey producers do, without regard for local or self sales. These drums of honey become part of the international commodity HONEY and are usually sold for large food processors and honey packers.

contractor, or parent, but you don't know a great deal about running a business or bees on a large scale. This is where a mentor may be of great help to you.

A mentor should be someone who is doing or has done what you want to do. Maybe they appear to be, at first glance, your most direct local competition. But they may suggest markets where you can move into because they feel they are too busy



Jim Baerwald of Michigan demonstrates a multiple extractor uncapping facility for his commercial operation.



Buzz Riopelle (Ohio) filling buckets (sixty pound). This is the usual size of sideliner beekeepers, and are avoided by commercial beekeepers.

sales period. Yet all the equipment was neat, the operation was clean, and the bee droppings were cleaned off the windows. Pretty amazing, and reflecting a lot of energy going into the business.

Okay, some of you will call this beekeeper a commercial beekeeper. I don't want to quibble about it. But I do want you to understand that every item they sell there was a decision made at some point, and the decisions were made to continue selling a particular line (should we dip candles this year or stick with molded candles) or drop it.

And the formula they use to operate is one all sideline beekeepers could easily use. Each product line was added when they were ready for it, and not before. They took their time, grew slowly, relied on family for support labor, and seem to enjoy every minute of it. Maybe that is why sideline beekeepers seem to be so happy, they enjoy what they are doing, because if they did not enjoy it, they would get out of it and do something else. **BC**

There will be a Sideliner Symposium in Sacramento in conjunction with the joint industry meeting in January. For further information, contact Dr. Connor at Wicwas Press, 1620 Miller Road, Kalamazoo, MI 49001. Email ljconnor@aol.com.

and cannot service another account. Or they could be someone you met at a regional or national meeting that you pumped dry and then visited on a trip so you could see and touch the things he, or she, is doing.

I do not have a list of folks that would fill that need. But they are out there and you only need to start asking folks for their help and see how they respond.

Recently I visited a sideline beekeeper (by my definition, since both he and his wife are teachers). It sure seemed like they were doing everything, from honey production, crop pollination, varietal honey, queen

rearing, agri-tourism, cosmetics, related food lines (dressings, sauces), creamed honey, flavored honey, and a lot more. They employ three folks as needed to help them run four farm markets a week. That's a week. And they have a stand at the State Fair where they sell product like mad, requiring weeks of packing and labeling to meet the needs for this intensive

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