

# The History of Beekeeping in Alaska



## Part 2 of 2

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### Introduction

Last month we met Father Methodius, Alaska's first beekeeper; examined the controversy over whether bees were brought to Alaska by the Russians in 1809 and subsequently introduced to California (there is no evidence to suggest this); and how bees were first introduced to Alaska's Interior in 1913.

This month we pick up the story in the 1920's, follow through with the Depression era settlers in the Mat-Su Valley, see how air transportation revolutionized bee shipments and look at the present day distribution of honey bees in Alaska.

### Later Introductions – the Buzzing 1920's

The 1920's appear to be a beehive of apicultural attempts; many saw success for a couple of seasons, but then faded away. A number of years ago I spoke with a pioneer Alaskan, Alaska Linck, who told a story of sitting in the kitchen of Rika Wallen's Roadhouse (then named McCarty's Roadhouse) built at the junction of the Delta and Tanana Rivers. It was constructed in 1914, run for awhile by pioneer trader John Hajdukovich, and turned over to Rika Wallen in 1918 (Ferguson 2002). Rika was a Swedish immigrant who managed to produce vegetables, 20 tons of hay and keep bees all while running the roadhouse that catered to travelers on the Valdez-Fairbanks wagon trail (360 miles). Ms. Linck related to me how in April, the bees that had overwintered in the root cellar, would be flying up into the kitchen anxious to begin their summer activities (Linck 1993).

Bees were introduced to Haines (at the northern end of the inside passage, see map) with one colony arriving in 1924 and kept continuously until sometime later than 1930 (Alberts 1930). The Haines beekeeper, Thomas Dixon Paige (or *Page*); "Devil" was his self-appointed nickname (Livingston 1978), had four colonies in the fall of 1927, only one of which survived the fol-

lowing winter. The loss was ascribed to dampness, since the bees were kept in an open shed and had plentiful stores. In the fall of 1929, "Devil Paige" had five colonies, three of which survived the following winter. Three new swarms emerged during the summer of 1930 and two colonies died. Yields of honey averaged 50 pounds per colony; this was about one-fourth the amount usually obtained (USDA 1930). In other reports (Livingston 1978) Paige purportedly shared beekeeping with strawberry grower Charlie Anway, who grew teacup-sized strawberries and produced enough honey to sell. Another Haines resident, Emma Smith, says Page didn't get enough honey to make it pay (Livingston 1978).

In Wrangell, one colony of bees was brought in by F. A. Cooper to cross-pollinate

fruit trees in the spring of 1929. The beekeeper reported that the colony produced 210 pounds of honey and one swarm during the summer of 1929 (Alberts 1930). As beekeepers know, a single colony producing a swarm greatly reduces genetic viability as the only drones around to mate with emerging queens are the sons of the queen of the original hive. Wrangell is another Southeast Alaska fishing town famous for rainy weather – 210 pounds of honey seems almost like a fish story.

In 1924 a farmer living three miles south of Anchorage, J. N. McCain (Alberts 1930 & Horn 2005), bought a colony of bees in the spring of 1924, but lost them the following winter. They were wintered out-of-doors, but the entrance was closed accidentally and the bees were found to be



**McCarty's Roadhouse (later known as Rika's Roadhouse) circa 1922; built at the junction of the Tanana and Delta Rivers, the roadhouse served travelers along the Valdez-Fairbanks trail. Rika, a Swedish immigrant, raised bees in the 1920's. Photo courtesy of Guy Cameron Collection, accession # 72-38-445, Alaska and Polar Regions Archives, Rasmuson Library, University of Fairbanks <sup>1</sup>.**

dead in the spring of 1925.

In the spring of 1925 he bought two more colonies, both of which swarmed during the summer. During the winter of '25-'26 he overwintered an unspecified number of colonies in an unheated log building. Dampness in the building caused the death of some of the colonies.

In the spring of 1926 McCain had four colonies; during the winter of '26-'27 two colonies were wintered out-of-doors and the rest in a log building. Half of the colonies died in each spot, leaving a total of seven colonies active in the spring of 1927 (*confusing math in original reports - author*). The following summer one of the latter died, and the others did not swarm; of the six that went into winter ('27-'28) only two were alive in the spring of 1928. None survived the following winter. The hives that were wintered in the open were enveloped in 4" of sawdust probably very much along the methods described by Jim Tew in his series on overwintering honey bee colonies (Tew 2009).

### The Mat-Su Colonists – 1935

The Matanuska and Susitna Valley (Mat-Su) near Anchorage was opened for homesteading in 1935 by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt as part of the New Deal. Two-hundred and three farming families from one of the Great Depressions' hardest hit areas (Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan) were offered a fresh start, drawing 40 acre homestead parcels by lottery upon which to build a new life.

Life was not easy for the colonists, but among them were a few beekeepers. The USDA Agriculture Experimental Station in Palmer kept bees as part of their research activities; they brought in two 3-pound package bees and two 3-frame nucs from J.E. Wing of Cottonwood, California. Fed from an inverted container of sugar syrup, they were in transit for 10 days and arrived in excellent condition (Alberts 1930). The USDA Experimental Station overwintered the colonies in a "cool, dry basement", and no serious losses were experienced. Several

photos of Mat-Su beekeeping activities in the early 30's exist in the archives of the Rasmusen Library in Fairbanks.

Today the Mat-Su area is home to a number of beekeepers (Hicks 2009) and the South-central Alaska Beekeepers Association (SABA), which is the most active association in the State; they normally maintain a strong presence at the Alaska State Fair in Palmer.

### WWII and Shipments by Air – 1940's

Stewart West, writing in 1947 (West 1947), describes a Fairbanks lawyer, Mr. J.G. Rivers, keeping up to five colonies of bees for about 9 years, killing them in the fall and replacing them with package bees in the spring. Mr. Rivers managed his bees in a single brood box with a queen excluder and shallow supers for the honey crop that averaged about 50 pounds per season per hive. Before the war he had his packages shipped by rail and boat express which required from one to two weeks for delivery. For the first two years of World War II, transportation was so uncertain that he bought no bees. Since that time package bees have been coming into Fairbanks by air express usually in a matter of days.

Today shipping bees by airfreight is always a hand-wringing, knuckle-biting gamble. It is not unusual for the air transport company to kill a whole load; sometimes hundreds of packages. "*The bees are fine-they are all resting in the bottom of the cages; we wrapped them in shrink wrap because we thought they might get out and sting the dog in the hold; we put them in a container (sealed) because we thought they might get cold*" are just a few of the airlines' statements I've heard as the bees arrive dead on arrival.

### Modern Day Distribution

The main areas of Alaskan apiculture at present time (2009) are the Interior, the Mat-Su area, and the Kenai Peninsula. Bees have been kept in remote areas (Fort Yukon (Petersen 1990), Ambler (Hess 1982) and Wiseman (Schoppenhorst 2009) - all north of the

Arctic Circle) and in marginal areas such as Nome and Goodnews Bay (Livingston 1991). The cool damp climate of Southeast Alaska is no different now than it was 100 years ago, yet contemporary attempts have been made at keeping bees in Juneau, Haines, Wrangell, Gustavus, and Metlakatla that I am familiar with.

There appears to be an upwelling of interest in hobby beekeeping; perhaps it's the Alaskan "I-can-do-it-myself" attitude or just paralleling the interest that is blooming elsewhere. I estimate about 200 beekeepers manage 700-750 hives here in the Interior with the largest operation (240 colonies) belonging to Don Winston of Delta Junction.

Statewide there are no exact numbers—only estimates; perhaps 800-1,000 beekeepers manage 1500 to 2000 colonies. Weather is a constant battle (Hicks 2009), but the vast areas of wild forage can produce wonderfully pure wildflower honey. Alaska produces some of the "purest fireweed honey I've ever seen" according to Dr. Vaughn M. Bryant, a mellissopalynologist (expert on the pollens found in honey) at Texas A&M University. It commands a premium price on the local market. Unfortunately, not enough is produced to meet the potential demand.

With the advent of airfreight, it became easier to route package bees from California (the main supplier) to the transportation hubs of Anchorage and Fairbanks, as well as some of Alaska's smaller villages. Several village beekeeping projects got off to an impressive start, but after a few years dwindled or even disappeared due to lack of interest, a loss of subsidies, or poor returns, e.g. Ambler and Fort Yukon.

John Bohme (since deceased) of Homer on the Kenai Peninsula kept bees beginning in 1947 and holds the Alaska record for honey produced, albeit from a two-queen colony. He had two double-brood chambers shoved tightly together – in the center of this he stacked his 14 honey supers producing 332 pounds of honey. Homer resident Ray Hodge was an entrepreneurial force in beekeeping, keeping as many as 120 colonies (1984-1990) and selling honey through his



Above left, beehives at USDA Experimental Farm, Matanuska Station circa 1936<sup>2</sup>; above right - "Lloyd Bell and his bees" circa 1930 Matanuska Valley<sup>3</sup>. Photos courtesy USDA Agriculture Experimental Station Collection.





**John Bohme's record hive that produced 332 pounds of honey in 1962. Photo courtesy of University of Alaska, School of Natural Resources, *Agroborealis* magazine<sup>4</sup>.**

health food store- "Homer Natural Foods" until the Exxon Valdez oil spill of 1989. He subsequently managed colonies in the Point McKenzie area and Homer, then moved to Fairbanks for a few more years of beekeeping.

In 1981 the Mauneluk Native Association funded the purchase of bees and equipment for 12 hives in the Inupiat (Eskimo) village of Ambler located some 50 miles above the Arctic Circle. Bees arrived by air on May 15<sup>th</sup> (temperature 15°F), were successfully hived and produced an average of 18 pounds per colony which was distributed among any of the 240 residents who wanted it (MacManus 1982). Bees were ordered for a couple more seasons, one attempt was made at overwintering, but the project faded away.

Scott Schoppenhorst and his wife, Heidi, have the distinction of being North America's farthest north beekeepers (Latitude 67.43°N – about 190 miles north of Fairbanks). Living in the village of Wiseman (population 18-20), they have four colonies of bees. Heidi, who grew up there, recounts her father, Rick Reakoff, having bees in the early 1970's. In a 1974 article Rick Reakoff tells of installing Italian package bees on May 15<sup>th</sup>, shipped all the way from Georgia (Reakoff 1974). Talk about culture shock! Scott and Heidi sell their honey at truck/gift shops along the Dalton Highway – Alaska's road to the Arctic Ocean.

Hal Livingston, an institution in Interior beekeeping, has kept bees continuously in Fairbanks since 1961. He recalls that the year after the big flood of 1967 was one of his most productive years - his yields have ranged from 19 to 128 pounds per colony. He has managed up to 90 colonies in one season. Dave Tozier of Hives and Honey in North Pole was an equipment dealer, bee supplier and writer here in the Interior, but has since sold the business and retired from bees for health reasons.

In theory there are four local associations (Interior, Kenai, Southcentral, and Cook Inlet) plus a Statewide association, all of



**Map showing the location of current beekeeping activity (or attempts) in Alaska.**

which vary in their levels of activities. SABA (Southcentral Alaska Beekeepers Association) is the most active. The Interior, Cook Inlet, and State associations have lapsed and the Kenai has reorganized. The most important accomplishment of the Alaskan beekeeping associations was the drafting and implementation of the State statutes in the early 1980's regarding beekeeping. In brief, bees entering the State must be certified free of disease, no used equipment to be brought in, no bees on comb, and the law deals with treatment when diseases such as AFB and EFB are discovered. The full text of the law can be accessed on the web at <http://www.legis.state.ak.us/cgi-bin/folioisa.dll/aac>, click on Title 11 - (Natural Resources); click #4 - (Agriculture 11AAC32-11AAC39), and on #35, Bees and Beneficial Insects.

### Conclusion

Writing these articles was a labor of love-a project that has been going on in fits and starts for the last 20 years. My goal is to set the historical record as straight as possible. I welcome any and all *documented* evidence that may challenge my assertion that 1900 was the date of the first introduction of honey bees to Alaska. *Ego apis ergo sum*.

### Acknowledgements

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- (4). "John Bohme and his record hive", Photo courtesy of Alaska Agriculture & Forestry Station, School of Natural Resources, *Agroborealis*, May 1974, pp. 23, a University of Alaska Fairbanks publication.

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