

Bees

There at Twin Bridges along the Siletz River, as I became increasingly self-sufficient with garden and milk goat, chickens and turkeys I realized I should be keeping bees. So during late fall of 1972, I ordered a hive body, foundation, a smoker, gloves, mask, but I couldn't afford the bees at the time. I figured money would be more forthcoming when weather improved and fellows began to rub all winter's rust off their rifles. Plus, I didn't need a package of bees until spring.

But spring didn't bring any relief to the dollar crunch I was experiencing. If anything, money was even tighter as I stocked more and more inventory as well as purchased needed machinery: to continue building rifles, I had to have another bandsaw; I needed bluing tanks, another buffer. Bees were a useful addition to a farmstead I could do without so keeping a hive of bees slipped in priority until it was too late to order packaged bees for delivery that spring.

Don Schilling, however, thought I was already keeping bees so when a swarm landed on a low fir bough in his front yard he called to ask if I wanted to capture them. Afraid of getting stung, he wanted them away from his house.

Beyond what I had read, I had no experience with bees. I wasn't sure that I could have identified the queen if I found her. But I had an empty hive, and Don had a readily accessible swarm ... I placed the hive body in front of his noble fir. Individual bees buzzed me, but the swarm didn't pay me any attention which was encouraging. I don't know why an adult human should feel intimidated by a creature as small as a bee. Sure, on a normal person a bee sting will burn for awhile, will swell into a welt, but the person isn't really hurt. A bear will take a lot of stings to get honey, and I suspect bee stings hurt bears as much as they do a person. I suspect too many of us don't really know what a bee sting feels like. If we were ever stung, it was when we were children. That certainly was my case. As a result, we fear the unknown.

Cautiously, I cut off the fir bough around which the swarm clung, and with bees flying in my face, I dropped the bough into the hive body.

Only half of the bees ended up inside the hive. The other half of the swarm was all over the outside of the super, with many of the bees on me.

Being a determined novice, I feared the queen might be with the bees outside of the hive, and I wanted the swarm now that I had bees landing on me and crawling all over me—I asked Don if he had any honey. He did, and I reopened the hive and set the partial can he gave me inside. But now I was concerned for my safety and in my haste to close the hive, I squashed hundreds of bees.

I felt like a murderer, much more so than when I have harvested deer. My inexperience had killed those bees, and while I felt bad about killing them, my greatest fear was that one of them might have been the queen.

With the bough and the can of honey inside the hive, there wasn't anything more I knew to do other than wait till dark to move the hive ... I returned home to prepare a platform for the hive. Because of the rain and the field mice, I wanted the hive to be at least a couple of feet above the weeds.

When I returned to Don's and checked the hive by flashlight, all of the bees were inside. Don said he would be glad to see that swarm gone. I thanked him for calling me, and still not knowing exactly how I would get the bough out from inside the hive, I hauled it home and set it up at the edge of my garden.

Howard Wyscarver had kept bees during the War when sugar was rationed (beekeepers could buy unrationed sugar to feed to their hives); he was again keeping bees and had three different Italian hybrid varieties, all known for their gentleness. So I called Howard for help when no matter how much smoke I used I was still getting stung if I had the hive open for more than a minute.

The stings didn't really bother me. In fact, after several months I finally quit reacting to them. But the stings were costing me bees that would otherwise be out gathering nectar, and I didn't want to kill bees needlessly. I had grown sort of attached to the little girls although I knew the affection wasn't mutual.

One afternoon on his way into the mill, Howard swung by, and after opening my hive, told me the bees I had were the meanest bees he had ever encountered. He didn't know what kind they were: they were too dark for Italians, and too large for Caucasians. But whatever they were, he said I should requeen, and he suggested that I order a Midnight queen.

Money was still tight, and these bees were diligent workers so I never ordered another queen. Instead, I made sure I only checked the hive during the hottest part of the day. I also made sure I could quickly get in and out. And I used lots of smoke.

A year later when I was disposing of what I wouldn't be moving to Alaska, I called Howard and asked if he wanted the hive, which was now four supers high. He offered me twenty-five dollars for it. I would have given him the hive (I owed him many favors). But money was still a problem so I took his twenty-five dollars and delivered the hive to the roof of his machinery shed where he had his other hives.

Twenty years later I returned to the Oregon Coast to visit friends and acquaintances, and I stopped by to see Howard, whose farm had about it a prosperous appearance. He had retired from the pulpmill and was farming fulltime. His wife of many years had died, and he had remarried. And all of those hives of Italian hybrids had died out. The only hive he had left was that one he had bought from me.

He said those bees were just as mean as ever, but maybe that was what it took to survive the rain of the Coast. Maybe it is. He said every so often he thought about requeening, but he never had.

Honey bees are not native to North America, but to Asia and the Middle East. They were introduced to this continent by early European colonists—by the mid 19th-Century, honey bees had preceded Anglo-Europeans from sea to shining sea, becoming naturalized in Western Oregon long before I arrived along the coast.

But what kind of bees were they? Obviously they could handle the cold rainy weather of Lincoln County. And I said to Howard, "I just wish I knew what kind they were other than free." I had, two decades earlier, told him how I obtained them.

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