Stahlman beekeeping notes for 2021

Issue # 51 Winding down the year of 2021

I enjoy keeping bees. Every year seems to be different. As I look back at 2021, I have taken on a new appreciation of what a virus (COVID) has done to change my thinking on a number of things.

My bees were lined up clustered in such a way that drifting bees could spread disease and mites thru out my bee yard. I am going to have to find a new model of bee yard placement for my hives this coming year. The first thing I can really handle is reducing the number of hives in each location.

As I drove out to the bee yard the other day, another development (a big development) has started. It starts with bulldozers knocking down trees and building roads into open fields. It looks like this new development will be big – maybe a square mile of open fields and trees. Like scout bees, the real-estate hawks are at work. In our HOA we get letters in our mail box almost every week from a realtor, wanting to either list our house or buy it!

I know that most of the sideline beekeeping operations here are now driving an hour to work their bees. Those individuals able to move bees are in a better position to survive than those with fixed locations.

I am looking back at the four most important requirements for securing a maximum crop of honey. 1] Good bees, 2] good beekeeping equipment, 3] intelligent apiary management and 4] having bees in a location or area where conditions are favorable for the production of honey. I don't care how far one goes back in the history of beekeeping; these four requirements have stood the test of time.

Covid has added a new requirement – viruses are spreading and mutating rapidly. Varroa mites not only weaken our hives - they have a mutualistic symbiosis with viruses. Securing a good honey crop depends on thousands of healthy worker bees per hive. To have "GOOD BEES" we are going to have to be smart in the way we manage Varroa mites. The standard products now available are not doing the job we expect of them!

Covid is teaching us to keep a distance of 6 feet between us and wear a mask. Can the same principles be adapted to bee yard management? Is 6 feet apart good enough? If we have strong hives flying a mile or so to rob a hive infested with mites, are we not defeating the

purpose of thinking 6 feet or is the management of a hive going to be to equip each hive with a robbing screen? By the way, a robbing screen is still not the answer for starving bees.

My work load this winter does involve building more boxes, frames, and related equipment. An order for foundation has already been made – I am going in with several other beekeepers to make up an order. Larger orders are less expensive than a single order.

Granulated sugar can be fed to good advantage. Bees need water to mix with sugar. During cold weather there is usually some moisture that accumulates in the hive on top of the inner cover. Moisture is given off by the clustered bees.

Check for dead colonies! Hives can be visited on a warm days [There is a difference between a mild and a hard winter]. Equipment can be picked up and repairs made if needed. Any dead bees should be removed from the hive and frames, bottom boards cleaned, and comb in frames checked.

I usually try to determine why a hive died. One can easily check the conditions of frames. If they look like this:

This frame came from a hive – not a single bee left in the hive.

What does this frame indicate? There is no sign of brood. Not a drop of honey left in the hive.

This hive did have honey in it at one time. No wax moth damage indicates that this is something that happened recently.

Often when a hive fails due to mites, there may still be some bees including a queen left in a hive with some capped brood.

This frame came from a hive that had food stored in these cells. This indicates that at some point, it had a good population of bees and a queen.

I have been writing about the competition bees have for finding food. Usually, toward fall, honey bees will find plenty of food in goldenrod or aster. However, when there is a shortage

of food, scout bees begin to look at other hives – hives weak for various reasons unable to defend their hive. Note that the comb in this frame is dark. Dark comb indicates that brood was raised in this comb at some point.

The lack of any capped brood indicates that a problem existed with this hive – most likely a poor queen or they were unable to replace a failing queen. This hive was in trouble well before it was robbed out.

Signs of robbing:

Note how ragged the cells look – the cappings over the honey in these cells have not been completely removed.

The bottom board of this hive was covered with small wax chips.

Robbing would indicate that bees in other hives were short of food. Once robbing begins – the end result is this.

A hive is completely demoralized, it food stolen - with no hope to recover.

I see many reports of bees absconding from hives this year. Could it be that the bees in the hive were so defeated by robbing bees that they drifted to other hives? Another thing stood out – no hive beetles. I usually see a lot of small hive beetles in hives that are failing. Thus, as a weak hive, this hive and its bees were destroyed by other nearby hungry bees.

It is that time of the year that a beekeeper should be checking for dead colonies. Hive equipment should be removed from the apiary and cleaned up. In some cases, a beekeeper might want to leave equipment in the bee yard but make sure there are no entrances for mice to get into the hive. Mice can cause havoc by chewing out comb and building a nest between frames. One spring chore is checking for hives that die later in winter. Time is often taken up with many beekeeping chores in the spring.

Dead out hives should be cleaned up. By that I mean comb in frames should be checked for disease -- remains of larvae and capped brood. Taking care of comb especially if the comb contains honey will avoid robbing early in the spring.

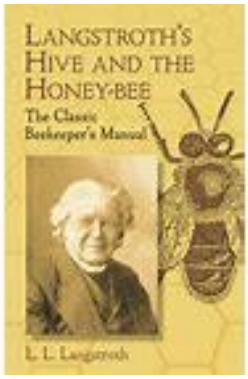
I will begin the notes for 2022 in several weeks and address many problems with replacing hives that die out. I just contacted my bee supplier in Georgia concerning the cost of package bees. The price has gone up 20% over last year. I found 3 pound package bees listed for $162.00 per package. For any of you looking to replace dead out hives, you had better start looking for a supplier. Last year prices of $120.00 are history! I did find one local seller of 3 pound packages listing delivery dates in late March and 1st of April for $135.00.

If you know you need to replace bees for dead-out hives, I would suggest you get your order in soon.

I expect bee losses to be heavy this winter. Last year nucleus (5 frame) hives were selling for $175.00 to $200.00. Some of the suppliers will not even quote a price right now!

Expand your beekeeping knowledge thru the winter months.

The most important to read is in my opinion "Langstroth's Book, "A Practical Treatise on the Hive and Honey-Bee". His name stands along those of François Huber, Charles Butler, Franz von Hruschka and Johannes Dzierzon.



It is available from Amazon at a very reasonable price in several versions for less than $20.00 per copy.

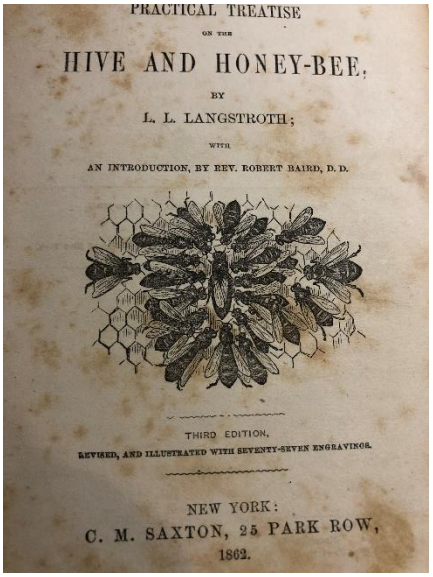
This book has been in continuous print since 1853. It is a valuable beekeeping book. Langstroth is listed as the "Father of Modern Beekeeping." To know nothing about him or the information in this book is to be somewhat in the "dark ages."

Langstroth died in 1895. But the business of keeping bees and explaining the use of the Langstroth hive will endure long into the future. There is no one that has had the lasting influence on modern day beekeeping as he has. His generation included A.I. Root, Charles Dadant, and other noted beekeepers such as C.C. Miller and A.J. Cook.

The change in beekeeping methods can best be illustrated with the following quotation from Langstroth: "While freely admitting that the old plan of killing the bees has, in the hands of the ignorant, met with the best success, I am persuaded that a more humane and enlightened system can be made much more profitable. The use of movable frames permitting, as they do, the weakest stocks to be strengthened or united to others, will, I trust, in due time, introduce the happy era when the following epitaph, taken from a German work, might properly be placed over every pit of brimstoned bees:

Here Rest,
Cut off from useful labor,
A Colony of

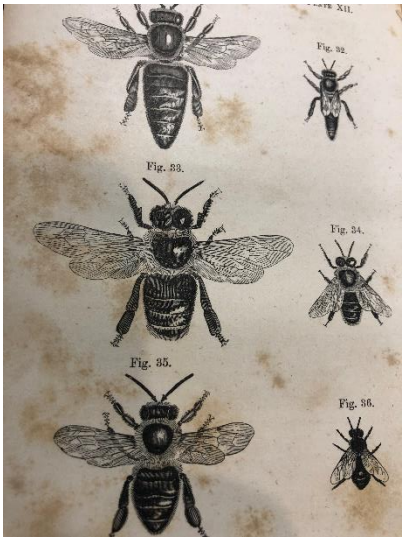
Industrious Bees,
Basely Murdered
By its
Ungrateful and Ignorant
Owner


PRACTICAL TREATISE
ON THE
HIVE AND HONEY-BEE,
BY
L. L. LANGSTROTH;
WITH
AN INTRODUCTION, BY REV. ROBERT BAIRD, D. D.

THIRD EDITION,
REVISED, AND ILLUSTRATED WITH SEVENTY-SEVEN ENGRAVINGS.

NEW YORK:
C. M. SAXTON, 25 PARK ROW,
1862.


So work the Honey Bees,
Creatures, that by a rule in Nature, teach
The art of order to a peopled kingdom.—*Shakspeare.*



The book is filled with great illustrations.

Even if it has been 178 years since this book was first published, it is a classic beekeeping book.

Any bee master should want to know the contents of this book and understand why Langstroth's contribution to beekeeping is so widely acknowledged.