

STAHLMAN BEEKEEPING

NOTES FOR 2023

Vol. 5 Issue # 21 June 3, 2023 Thinking about making money keeping bees!

Memorial Day weekend has passed and I had a chance to reflect on my past. I attended my 66th class reunion. Visited a long time beekeeping friend and Grover Hill where I grew up and spent my very early years learning and working honeybees.

So much water has passed under the bridge is a common saying. I had a chance to think of the 40 days or so a honeybee worker spends its life. It seems like 40 days are so short. But as I look back, 80 + years seems short.

And what a change I have seen. The old home place is a parking lot, the high school has been torn down and all my friends have grown old. I drove past old bee yard locations – farms gone – new roads -- progress. And there was not much time to reach out to all those living individuals who had a chance to impact my life. I found it a bit depressing to drive thru the grave yard to visit my parents grave site. There was my grandpa and grandma. There were friends now gone as well as many family members.

Memorial day is a time for remembering and giving thanks for all that have made me who I am and even my existence. I look back at friends that gave their life to protect this country. Four of them are remembered at the Vietnam Memorial.

And honeybees have followed me thru all those years. When one thinks things are bad, think -- they could be worse. And still honeybees have not changed at all. In all those 80+ years they still gather honey and they still sting. They still follow the bloom and they still build comb in exactly the same way they did so many years ago.

I am often asked about making money keeping bees?

Every business or hobby has a beginning. Someone started it! In some cases it is passed on to a second generation and beyond.

IMPORTANT POINTS

In his 1855 Edition of *Mysteries of Bee-Keeping Explained*, Moses Quinby devoted several pages to “Why the word luck is applied to bees.”

You need not depend on any charm or mystic power for your success – if you do, I cannot avoid the unfavorable prediction of a failure.

He goes on – It is true that a few have accidentally prospered for a few years; I say accidentally, because when they have no true principles of management, it must be the result of accident.

I found that in good seasons the majority of people had luck, but in poor seasons, the reverse and when two or three occurred in succession, then was the time to lose their luck. It was evident, then, if I could pass in safety the poor seasons by any means, I should do well enough in good ones.

My advice therefore is, that reliance should be placed on proper management, instead of luck!

There are many ways to make money from honeybees. One can start small and grow a business. Choices for income include any number of possibilities. Honey is only one product of a hive of honeybees. The most important ingredient is the person wanting to enter the business of keeping bees. They must love honeybees – and more than that they must thrive on hard work. They must be either wise or stupid or both. This is not a desk job but a person must understand how to manage not only bees but people and money. Honesty is very important. The fast buck crowd doesn't last long.

Focus is important: A person must decide what makes them comfortable:

- **Working bees, raising queens, producing bees for packages, moving bees for pollination and moving bees to honey foraging sites. Usually little is required dealing with the public.**
- **Selling bee products – equipment, honey, teaching, doing cut-outs, etc. (A lot of public contact – and public service)**
- **Many individuals may do a combination of both. Many begin as part-time beekeepers that do a combination of all of these. Selling local raised queens, local nucs, honey sales etc. Part-time business is a good starting point for building a beekeeping empire. The other component to building an empire – who takes over when the founding father/mother passes?**

I am at a loss for words to explain what it takes to become a commercial beekeeper other than say, college may provide some business savy, entomology may give one insight to the life of insects, and if one graduates – other professions all offer greater financial opportunities with less strain on the body and most likely fewer headaches.

Currently the University of Montana offers a course in commercial beekeeping and other universities are offering Master Beekeeping programs.

[The University of Montana Masters Beekeeping Program](#)

[January 26](#) ·

Welcome to 2023!! Registration is now open for the winter online Journeyman Beekeeping class (Feb 6-April 7).

<https://www.umt.edu/bee/journeyman.php>.

FYI, we have been working on courses in Commercial Beekeeping. The Apprentice and Journeyman courses from our current online offerings will be prerequisites for entry into the Commercial Courses. We will be beta-testing the Commercial Courses in 2023.

There is no certification required to become a commercial beekeeper such as required to become a teacher, nurse, or other professional occupations. Anyone can start a beekeeping business. Commercial beekeeping operations employee almost anyone willing to get stung! Hard work – work more than 8 hours a day, follow rules laid down by the boss [Usually the owner or foreman – somewhat like a dictatorship], have the willingness to learn, travel in bee season, have a CDL [Commercial Drivers License] or operate a skid-loader helps and the pay

and job security are questionable. Having the knowledge to work bees such as grafting in queen rearing will be tested very quickly. No excuses for failure!

The biggest challenge to anyone wanting to start a commercial beekeeping operation is the issue of labor. A person at best is quite limited to how much they can do! A friend of mine, Billy Engle, once told me that “God only gave you two arms, two legs and 24 hours in a day!” Many individuals working bees later in life have bad backs and little to show for the many hours spent bending over bee hives, and lifting heavy equipment [most commercial operations have “Swingers or loaders” to lift bee hives and honey supers].

My advice to anyone thinking about making a living working bees is to start by working for a commercial beekeeping operation. It doesn't take long to weed out those unfit to work bees.



A quick lesson on how not to do it:

I am going to share a real life example of a beekeeper that decided to give up his job working for a large company with insurance benefits, security, and good pay. A pay check every week paid for a house, car, some bees (about 30 hives), and he dreamed of being his own boss.

He drew up a business plan – had some professional help. He applied for a large bank loan and used his house as collateral. To start, he rented a truck to go to Georgia to pick-up 300 packages of bees, ordered hive equipment (already constructed and put together), located locations to put bees and worked out of his garage. His plan included building a larger building to extract and store equipment. His plan was perfect.

His thinking was that he could do all the work – saving labor cost. I was in Georgia when he showed up to pick up his 300 packages of bees from Wilbanks Apiaries. His plans were big and he didn't mind sharing the fact that he was going to be making a lot of money and his business was going to continue to grow. He was going to double hive numbers each year – I am not sure for how long.

He didn't take into account that 300 hives of bees wouldn't come near to creating the kind of income required to pay the bank loan – especially in the first year. Just like a new beekeeper starting with package bees – it takes time for bees to build up to collect surplus honey. He was expecting the 300 hives to get a honey crop the first year. He didn't listen to the advice given by more experienced beekeepers.

It would have taken superman to install 300 packages of bees into new hives – especially after a 650 - 700 mile drive home from Georgia. Remember what Billy Engle said!

Well somehow – I am not sure how – he got the bees installed. He might have realized he needed some help and had to pay or ask volunteers to help get the job done. Package bees need food. He did include the cost for corn syrup in his plan. I think you know where I am going with this!

The final chapter to his story was he lost his house and his wife. Ended up going bankrupt and lost the seniority at the job he left.

Some people are still thinking much like those “49ers” during the gold rush day of the mid 1800's.

My guideline is simple:

- Don't go into debt to build a beekeeping business.
- Do start small and build up hive numbers. At some point you will decide if the effort required to handle the hive numbers you own is worth the effort.
- There is a ready demand for honey, nucs, and pollination.
- Your customers are your best form of advertisement!
- Be true to your word!