An Age Old Tradition

Beekeeping is an age old tradition practiced in this area for many generations. Bees are found both wild and domesticated in North Missouri. There are many aspects to beekeeping, from caring for the hives to discovering wild swarms.

To find a wild swarm of bees begin looking for a fairly large pond on a warm summer afternoon when the flowers are blooming. If bees are close they will be at the pond getting water for their honey. Watch them take off, they will make a straight line for the hive. Begin walking in the direction the bee went. If a bee is on a flower, watch it take off to check your direction. Finding the tree may take some time, but chances are it can be found. Mark the tree so it can be found again and to let others know it has been claimed.

To remove the honey and the bees, the tree should be cut. If the bees are in the main trunk of the tree, cut the entire tree down. Jim Thomas, a 40-year beekeeper, remembered, "The first wild swarm I took I found walking home from work one day when I was 13. The bees were in the branch of a black cherry tree. I went home, found my dad, and told him that I wanted to get a swarm of bees. He asked how I was going to do it and I told him I was going to take a tub and a curtain, put the tub underneath the branch, climb up, and cut it off so that it falls in the tub, throw the curtain over it and then you will drive me home. He thought for a little bit and then we did it."

Bees will build their homes almost anywhere. In years past beekeepers preferred to use pieces of hollow gum logs, which is why many hives are today called gums. For best results use a prebought or a homemade box. It should have one opening facing the south, to keep out the bad weather, and should be elevated on cement blocks. This helps keep the hive level, prevents rats from nesting underneath, and protects the base of the hive from rotting.

During the summer months bees can be left alone. They may need to be checked from time to time to make sure no diseases or pests are bothering the hive, and to prevent a young queen from being born which could split the hive. To check on bees requires wearing bee garb: heavy pants, a hat with a veil, and gloves. This protects Mr. Thomas from the sometimes deadly sting. He recalled, "The worst stinging I ever saw was when bees got excited about a gelding picketed about 50 yards away from the hive but the bees' flight path led across it. Within 15 minutes the horse had been stung several thousand times. I cut the rope, got it away from the bees, and called the vet; we lost the horse anyway."

When fall comes the real work begins, harvesting the honey. Remove the slats that contain honey; these will be covered with a waxy substance. Underneath there will be a hexagon tube about one-half inch long. To remove this use a hot knife and cut the wax off. Then set the slat in a pan and let gravity ooze the honey out. Several machines are available and Mr. Thomas described one. "It looks like a 50-gallon garbage can with a motor on one side and a counter weight on the other. There is a spindle going down the middle with stainless steel baskets." It works by centrifugal force pulling the honey out. Once the comb is empty or the machine is full, the honey can be put through a strainer and jarred.

by Ben Thomas

A handcranked honey extractor like the one pictured here is used to remove honey from its comb.

Beekeepers use a veil and gloves to prevent the honey bee from stinging them.
The largest honey producer in this area is Bolley Bunch with over 100 hives. Most people keep just a few, 7-12, so selling the honey is not important because they only raise the honey for themselves. The larger producers are feeling competition though, said Mr. Thomas. "The honey you buy in the store is foreign. I'm not saying it's good or bad, I'm just saying that the countries that produce it may not treat it with the purity and respect it deserves."

After the fall harvest the bees hibernate in the hive during the winter. Many people use this time to repair equipment or build new boxes. Almost every beekeeper will clean the super, the part of the hive where the honey is produced and stored, to remove any larvae pests have laid such as mice, skunks, ants, and moths. Usually the bees can take care of the pests themselves, but if they do not the hive could be lost.

Although most people in this area keep bees as a hobby, some hold their bees dear. Mr. Thomas swore, "As I go from hive to hive there is a change in personality between each swarm. Some of the hives I could work with nothing on but the hive right next to it will attack you by the time I've said this." Many techniques used a hundred years ago are still used today and beekeeping is as popular as ever.

Cliff Hollenbeck removes a section of brood where the bees live during the winter months.

Cliff Hollenbeck prefers to wear white when working around bees because the color calms them. He is looking for the queen bee by removing sections of brood.