



Brushy Mountain Bee Farm

Jennifer Berry

In The Brushy Mountains of North Carolina Sits This Innovative Bee Supply Company

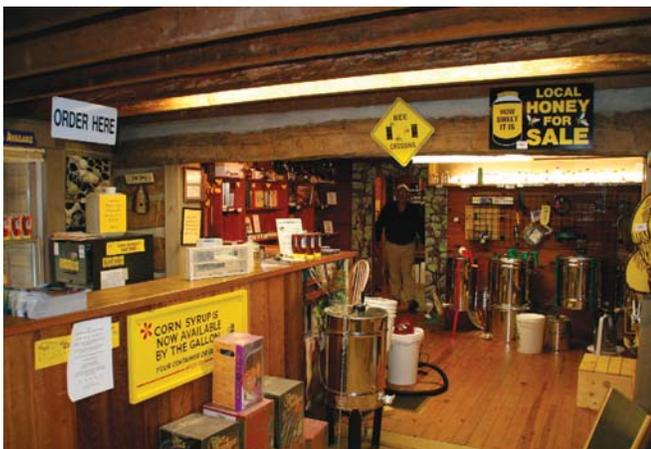
Being an Air Force brat I spent the majority of my younger years bouncing from school to school, neighborhood to neighborhood, and state to state. Moving about was trying at times, but also exciting. By the time I was 13 we had lived in nine different states and 11 different homes. Leaving those homes meant leaving my friends behind which was always difficult. It seemed the minute I was finally asked to join the group at lunchtime or finally **not** the last to be picked for a team it was time to pack up and move to the next location. I was sometimes envious of my classmates who had resided in the same place most of their lives. They had shared memories with others since kindergarten or before. The trend continued into my adulthood. Even after college, work moved me about from state to state. It gave me the opportunity to meet some extraordinary people, some of whom I'll never forget. But there have been some of those I've met that I've felt truly lucky to call friends. Steve and Sandy Forrest are two of those folks.

If you have ever been to an Eastern Apicultural Society meeting or a North Carolina meeting, or others too numerous to mention, and found yourself wandering through the vendor area, then you must have met Steve or Sandy Forrest. They are the body and soul of Brushy Mountain Bee Farm. Each year they will attend anywhere from eight to 10 different beekeeping meetings. They tirelessly stand from sun up to sun down explaining anything from how to become a beekeeper to why this bottom board is the best you can buy, or try this hat on or what do you think about this new item? Steve is definitely the salesman in the family but he won't ever sell you anything he doesn't believe in or wouldn't use himself. That is why when I was a beginner I enjoyed hanging out at their booth listening to each of them explain the wonders of beekeeping.

Brushy Mountain Bee Farm, like most businesses, wasn't created overnight. It took years to evolve. So let's take a look at the road leading to the conception and creation of Brushy Mountain Bee Farm.

Steve and Sandy met in college while Steve was attending graduate school. Of course they immediately fell in love, were married and began to pursue their calling, teaching. Sandy taught Kindergarten for five years and Steve taught business classes in high school for six years in Statesville, North Carolina. Even though it was a grand time, they both wanted a business of their own, especially one in agriculture. They decided to move to the country and pursue their dream. On Steve's birthday, November 7, 1977, they received their first business license. Their initial thoughts for a business was to either dry apples or produce honey. Thankfully, the latter made more sense. Steve will be the first to admit, "it hasn't been easy, but we sure have had fun along the way."

The property they purchased is located in the Brushy Mountains of Eastern North Carolina. In the beginning their property consisted of 60 acres with a house, a small



Inside the old log cabin which is now the retail store.



Crew busy at work assembling equipment.

barn, and a separate two room house just down the hill. The first night in the house they slept in the attic because they felt safer on higher ground. “The bathroom didn’t have a sink; no septic system, just a big barrel out back; no closets; over 30 window panes knocked out and it was in the middle of nowhere. I was scared that first night” Sandy said. The house they purchased is what you call a “fixer-upper”. They completed some of the work themselves but eventually had to hire help to do the remaining repairs.

During construction they stored all their belongings in a tractor trailer parked in the front yard. Sandy laughs about how their stove and refrigerator stayed on the front porch for several months while they refurbished the kitchen. “The house had so many holes in it you could stand in the kitchen and see the basement” she said. After a year’s worth of construction they finally settled into their dream home. Soon the basement became Steve’s wood shop where he began designing and building bee equipment and the extra bedroom became the office. The barn later became the working warehouse and the two room house was used for storage. Next they decided to add onto the old two room house just down the hill. They wanted to turn it into a retail store with office space. Just above their house rested a 200 year old log cabin. It would be the perfect addition if they could only get it down the hill. Steve had the perfect relocation plan all worked out. They asked the gentleman who owned the property if they could have the cabin. He said it was theirs as long as they kept his field bush-hogged. Not a bad proposition they thought. The neighbors hearing of the plan told them, “you’ll never be able to move that there log cabin, never, never, never”. This only made Steve want to achieve his goal that much more. “We’ll show them” he thought.

The plan was first to remove the extra rooms built around the cabin that had fallen in. This would expose the actual log cabin. Next Steve and Sandy cut down three big poplar trees, drug them with their tractor and placed them next to the cabin. A neighbor came over and helped them jack up the corners so they could roll the logs under the cabin. Then it would be so simple, they’d just “drag” the cabin down the hill while resting on the logs. The day arrived for the move. All the neighbors were convinced the cabin wasn’t going anywhere. To them Steve and Sandy were city folks and didn’t have a clue what to do. They lashed the logs with chains, got a bulldozer and drug the cabin down the hill and right next to the ole’ house. Suc-

cess they thought. Not only did they move the cabin but it still remained intact. They were proud and the neighbors amazed. Moments after the celebration began reality hit. They couldn’t get the cabin to line up next to the house; therefore the adjoining buildings would never be level. After all the planning and hard work (and effort to prove they weren’t just city folks) here they had to tear the cabin down after all. Each log was numbered and set aside for reassembly. After Steve told the story he said in his most serious voice, “Which brings forth the axiom in which we live by, ain’t nothing easy at the bee farm.”

But exactly how they got into manufacturing and designing bee equipment is another story. After moving to the country they acquired 100 hives and were on their way to producing sourwood honey. Weekly Steve and Sandy would ride to the apiaries and check on their mounting amounts of honey. Sandy explained how exciting it was to see their very own colonies producing the prettiest sourwood honey they had ever seen. The last time they laid eyes on their colonies, each one had two supers completely filled with honey. The very next week they went to extract their bounty and found 80 of the 100 hives gone. They had vanished into thin air. They were just here a week ago, they pondered, what could have happened? After a few moments the harsh truth sunk in and they realized, the hives had been stolen! “They even took the railroad ties the hives were resting on,” Steve added. It’s a sad day when someone steals from you, no matter what it is. Yet, this story does have a silver lining. Steve and Sandy have both expressed that there is very little they would have changed in their lives. “In retrospect,” Steve said, “it was a blessing in disguise, because after that incident we decided to shift gears and focus on building woodenware products instead. Hallelujah for small miracles.” Steve admits that wood working is his true passion.

During the late 70s, early 80s, flyers advertised their business and were placed in stores around the area and handed out at bee meetings. Each morning Steve and Sandy would walk hand in hand down the long drive to the mailbox. Sandy would prepare the orders and take care of billing while Steve built and shipped the equipment. Word of mouth also helped boost sales in the early years. It wasn’t until 1982 that the first Brushy Mountain Bee Farm catalog hit the stands. “One of the major successes of a business is where to put the advertising dollars” Steve said. The catalog they publish each year is the hardest thing they do. It is extremely time consuming because it has to be perfect.

As with most businesses, the early years can be the leanest and with beekeeping demands occurring in spurts it was tough keeping the doors open. One minute the phone was ringing off the hook and then the next, silence. In order to sustain a business year round Steve and Sandy decided to try their hand at selling non-beekeeping items. For several years they sent out a 20 page catalog called the “Mountain Mercantile” in which they sold porch swings, pottery, fat lamps, honey pots, and other mountain crafts. After that endeavor they decided to try food items and sold under the name of “A Taste of Carolina” with a colored paged catalog which focused on foods of the south: country hams, peanuts, pickles, artichokes, smoked duck, turkey and trout. Meanwhile, they still worked hard at expanding the bee supply busi-

ness and eventually were able to let go of these other ventures.

As the business grew they moved the wood shop out of the basement and into the barn. After a few more years it was time to build a large warehouse which they did in 1986. Unfortunately it didn't stand long. A strong wind storm took the entire building to the ground. One morning, a few days later, twenty-six men showed up and tore the whole mess apart. Two women also appeared and fixed food while the men worked. A true southern cuisine was served; two meats, seven vegetables, and two desserts. It only took two days to clean up the mess and stack the usable wood under plastic sheets. Next they even brought in the local fire truck and blew off the pad. When they were completed a neighbor patted Steve on the back and said, "try it again son, we're with ya." Sandy laughed, "instead of a barn raising it was a barn cleaning." "It was amazing to see all these people band together and help us out; we were flabbergasted," Steve said. They figured the neighbors would never really accept them living in their neck of the woods. It may have been because they were city folks or the fact that they showed up in the country with Afghan hounds. In the early days they didn't have the typical farm dogs; no, they had what the neighbors swore were overgrown goats.

Steve and Sandy don't look back much but when I asked them if there was something they could change what would it have been? They both said, almost together, that they wished they had purchased a large warehouse in the small town down the road and moved the business there instead of running it out of their own house. They love the business but they can never get away from it. Their house sits less than 100 yards from the store and numerous warehouses.

Even though they both left the classroom, they never left behind the love of teaching. Their mission has always been to not only provide the best equipment available but also to help people succeed in beekeeping. "Our philosophy is to bring innovative products to beekeepers, to make the job of keeping bees easier, and to keep introducing beekeeping to folks all across the United States. Helping them to succeed in beekeeping is our dream" Steve said. They intentionally concentrated their efforts towards the hobbyist. They also wanted to offer quality equipment that the commercial folks were able to purchase. Today they are one of the largest suppliers to backyard beekeepers in the country.

Walking around the shops and warehouses Steve is



Larry Baily in the rendering area holding a block of newly formed wax.

like a kid, excitedly showing me the latest new piece of equipment or the quality of the craftsmanship, or where they render the wax or how they take orders. However, anytime an employee walked by he stopped and introduced me to them and chatted awhile. Then off to the side he said, "the strength of our business is our employees and we really have the best." It was a realization they learned early on when starting their own business. "The whole success is hiring good people and trust me we have great people" he said.

Thirty years later the office and basement wood shop have now turned into 20,000 square feet of working space. It consists of a wood shop, metal shop, sewing room, wax room, warehouse space plus offices and the retail store. If you ever find yourself in the Brushy Mountains of North Carolina and you're in need of some beekeeping supplies, you should stop by and check out the store. The log cabin and old house are still standing and now the base of the business. No more Afghan hounds, now you'll be greeted by Jake, the friendliest chocolate lab this side of the Mississippi. You may have to throw a stick a bit but he'll love you for it. Steve and Sandy have no plans on retiring anytime soon. They are having too much fun. They love their business, they love their employees, they love their land, they love each other, and of course, they love their dog Jake.

See ya! **BC**

Jennifer Berry is the Research Coordinator at the University of Georgia Bee Lab.