

# MOVIN' BEES

Everybody that's moved bees has a story.

Jennifer Berry

There are only a few things I dislike about beekeeping and foremost among them are: shipping queens and moving bees. Regarding the former, my article a few months ago mentioned that I was about to try UPS and would let you know how they compared to the USPS. Well, the first batch went out, and several died in shipment. What a disappointment! But, it could be worse, for example if several million bees were tipped out onto the highway at 65 mph, which brings to mind one of many fears beekeepers have associated with the latter.

But if everything goes ok, what's the big deal, right? Boxes of bees are loaded onto a trailer, the back of a truck or bottom of a trunk, either before sunrise, after sunset, or during the day when temperatures are cool, hauled a few or thousands of miles from home, unloaded, set up and they're good to go. Yet, when things go wrong, it can get really bad, really quickly, even to the point of downright dangerous.

If you've moved bees, then you know what I'm talking about. It's kind of a secret society. We recognize each other, (our fellow movers) as we pass in the hall at meetings. It's that understanding head nod, which translates into "Yeap, been there, done that, and why did I do that?" And, if you've moved bees with any regularity then you more than likely have a story to tell; one that hopefully includes a good bit of laughing.

Even though moving bees is hard work, and can be extremely nerve-racking, I find myself doing it quite often for the lab and the business. For example, every year, starting at around 80 miles north of Athens, the opportunity to make a potentially massive amount of sourwood honey presents itself at the end of June. At least that's in theory. Reality, sometimes, is not so gener-

ous. The sourwood nectar flow can be very fickle and will fluctuate drastically from year to year. If you have ever moved colonies to the mountains only to find a single cell of sourwood honey after weeks of work, then you would understand. It can be a very frustrating ordeal. It can also be deadly as well. Folks figure the bees will have plenty to eat, only to come back a month later to 1000s of starved bees.

But the promise of world-class honey can drive one "to drive" up there and back with a load of bees. You can't resist. Each year I get caught up in the frenzy despite not having made an ounce in previous years. Location, location, location!!! Then my friend Bob Binnie came to the rescue and offered to give up one of his great spots just outside of Tiger, Georgia. Finally, I thought, I'll get a taste of the "sourwood experience."

The spot was perfect, off the beaten path, down several winding dirt roads, and finally up the side of a mountain with beautiful scenic views and hundreds of sourwood trees. But, getting a truck and a trailer up there, loaded down with hives, was not going to be easy. The move was not only not easy, but downright miserable. I guess complacency had set in over the years because I found myself unprepared and unprotected. Plus, I had hired Bob Luckey, who was a brand new beekeeper, squeaky clean, right out of the box, had only worked bees a few times, and had never been stung before; he had no clue what he was about to get into.

Strong, robust colonies were needed for the job and had already been selected in advance. However, they were scattered across four different locations, which meant a lot of driving. It was a hot, humid night as we pulled into the first yard. The first thing on the list was to close en-



Putting foam in the front door.



Putting straps on.



Straps over screened top.



*Two-wheelers  
make life  
easier . . .*



*. . . especially up ramps.*

trances, for which we used window screen to allow extra ventilation into the colony along with bottom screens. The screen used is a heavier gage window screen that holds its shape once bent and stuck into place. It is much easier than having to nail on entrance moving screens for each of the 30 colonies (and cheaper). But, remember, you get what you pay for.

Once the entrances were all closed, it was time to strap the colonies. I prefer using moving straps as opposed to hive staples. I've had issues in the past with hive staples coming loose over time, allowing hive bodies to slip apart, and releasing bees. But, you know the saying, "If you have 10 beekeepers in the room you're going to get 12 different opinions." Everyone has a method they prefer. For me strapping colonies is easy and not too expensive. The main issue here is to make sure the straps are cinched down tightly and the loose pieces are tied securely so that they're not flapping around or getting tangled up. As we began the task of strapping, it was starting to get dark; so I was off to the truck to grab my trusty Coleman lantern, but it wouldn't turn on. After several minutes of fooling around with it, I went back for the Maglite flashlight, yet it wouldn't work either. "Really? Really?" Both sources of light wouldn't work . . . "Really!!!!" Then I turned on the truck lights because at least I knew those worked!

Now, if you're a direct descendent of Superman, Wonder Woman, Batman, Cosmic Boy, Spiderman or Mighty Mouse, then lifting a colony onto the back of a truck or bed of a trailer would be a piece of cake for you. I imagine you could load 30 colonies in a flash, the blink of an eye, a split second, but, for us mortals, picking up 100-200 plus pounds is not such an easy task. And over time, things begin to wear out a bit and since we can't regenerate broken down or worn out body parts, protecting what we have, especially our backs, becomes important. Two person hive lifters work nice for lighter colonies, or adjusting colonies once loaded, but, for the larger double-deeped, triple-supered ones, a hand truck comes in "handy". Though here's a word of caution: if your bottom boards are screened, you need to make sure the tongue of the hand truck is long enough to clear them. Otherwise, you may puncture your screen.

In the glow of the truck's lights, we were able to load the hives one by one without incident. Once loaded, the



*Three on, more to go.*

colonies were strapped to the trailer. Insert motto here: "Better to be safe than sorry!" A sharp swerve to miss a critter that just ran across the road or a sudden stop to avoid the stupid driver that cut you off while texting, scrolling through their iPod, and yelling at their child (all at the same time) instead of paying attention to the road. Sudden changes in direction or speed can result in hives bouncing down the road, which is not a good thing!

As we drove to the next yard, I figured we had experienced our requisite glitch for the evening (lights not working). So, we should be good to go. Hmmmm, have you ever seen Apollo 13? Remember, right after take off, they had a minor problem with the #5 engine, and, once it was bypassed, and the alarms went silent, Jim Lovell says to the crew . . . "looks like we just had our glitch for this mission." Little did he know, because just a few hours later – well, you know the rest of the story. A minor hiccup, followed by a sense of calm, then, Boom, even more issues materialize to deal with. And, it all started as we entered the fourth and final yard.

This is one of those yards you love and hate. You love it because it has great nectar potential, and you hate it because driving through it is enough to dislodge the fillings in your teeth. Yard 4 had been logged some years past and what remained were large stumps, holes, divots, terraces, ruts, and a steep incline to where the bees were. By now it was late and the grass was wet with dew. The

Ford with its trailer refused to go up the hill. No way sista! So, Bob and I grabbed what we would need and walked up the hill to retrieve the colonies.

Once we got there, we encountered yet another problem. Apparently, I can't count properly. This last yard had seven colonies needing to be screened and strapped, but only four screens and straps remained. Leaving the three colonies behind was not an option as I had promised the owners that I would remove all colonies that night so they could clear more land the next day. So, we stuffed grass into entrances and began hauling 200 lbs colonies down the hill using a two-person hive lifter. There was lots of huffing and puffing, but we managed just fine until the last hive.

It was an extremely heavy one, and, as we were about to clear the last stump, we both stumbled into a hole and dropped the hive. Fortunately, it only came apart between the top two supers but bees still went everywhere. We quickly put the colony back together, then dashed back to the truck to put on our veils. Both of us choreographed the sting dance as we removed bees from all parts of our body.

Once the dancing stopped we maneuvered the unstrapped hives into the center of the trailer, duct-taped the supers and lids, braced colonies, then bounced out of the yard and finally headed north towards sourwood country. It was midnight by the time we hit pavement, which meant we would arrive on site at 2:00 a.m. Bob Binnie had agreed to meet us at the bottom of the mountain and show us the way, which was a good thing. We never would have found it by ourselves. What a great friend Bob is to get out of bed at 2:00 a.m. and help us out.

The roads getting in while a bit bumpy, were at least maneuverable except for the last 100 yards. There was a steep bank with more of that dew covered grass. Bob Binnie recommended that I "gun it" in order to get the truck and the trailer up the hill, around a big oak tree, and to make the 90° turn needed to keep us from falling off the other side of the mountain. I did just that. I know for a fact that the truck and trailer went airborne at one point or another. By the time we came to a stop, the original positions of the hives had shifted quite a bit, especially those colonies that weren't screened or strapped. When we started unloading, bees covered the bed of the trailer, as well as the sides and tops of the hives. One thing you

*All bee movers belong to a Secret Society, you know. There's a handshake and everything. Dues are paid in stings.*

should know is that bees rarely fly at night; instead they crawl! And, insects always want to crawl up. Hence, as we're standing there trying to move hives, bees were crawling up our legs, underneath our britches, and under our shirts. With no bee suits to wear, long sleeve shirts to put on or gloves to show off, our veils, blue jeans and short-sleeved t-shirts became our only protection against the onslaught. Normally bees are particular adept at finding exposed skin to sting, but after the rough treatment these girls had just experienced; they were on a mission! By the end of the night, we both were showing off our new "cankles."

Because of this experience we now have a box that is brought along anytime colonies are moved. The box contains suits, leather gloves, (which we affectionately have termed "our big boy gloves,") a flashlight, extra screen and straps, duct tape, hive tools, a lighter, a first aid kit, box cutters, a 4 x 7 smoker, a small wad of pine straw, and a tin of Altoids (those "Curiously strong mints").

Another tidbit of information that I've learned since that night is to use foam pieces to block entrances and screened moving tops. The foam works great. It's cheap, and, if one piece is too long, you just pinch it off, or, if too short, just add another piece. You can get an old cushion from Goodwill and slice the foam into long, narrow pieces about the width of an entrance. Now, it is ready for stuffing. Screened moving tops are a must when moving colonies during the warm months. With screened tops and bottoms you don't have to worry about colonies overheating with entrances stuffed with foam. Just be ready to cover them if it begins to rain.

There is still time, even in the south, to get your colonies moved to that ideal location before the temperatures get too warm. The best part about this time of year, you don't have to move hives in the dark. Chilly mornings provide perfect opportunities because the bees are still clustered and not foraging. But please remember, be prepared, be careful and take your time. Never get in a hurry, especially when moving bees. It could end disastrously.

And as far as catching the "sourwood" fever this Summer; I'm prepared. I left the bees up in the mountains which both Bobs, the bees and myself are very happy about!

See Ya! **BC**

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