Beekeeping in Western Australia

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ALTHOUGH the southern portion of Western Australia is richly endowed with nectar-bearing flora suitable for the production of large quantities of excellent honey, there were no colonies of honey-bees in the area prior to the establishment of the Swan River Colony in 1829.

Native bees existed, but they were mainly solitary in their habits and, although occasionally two or three bees worked and nested together, they lacked the colony instinct of their relatives in other lands.

The pioneer settlers of the Colony, faced with the difficulty of importing all their sweetening materials, rightly surmised that the Australian bush could support a large bee population and made strenuous attempts to introduce European bees into the new land.

The difficulties of transporting hives in sailing-ships over thousands of miles of sea were eventually surmounted—but it was only after a long record of failures and bitter disappointments that European bees were successfully established in Australia.

Once the initial problems of introduction had been overcome, the bees found conditions ideal for successful honey-gathering. Bees from the settlers' hives swarmed and multiplied. Many swarms "went bush" and, before many years had elapsed, the "bee-tree" had become a common feature of the forest country.

Since its initial establishment over a century ago, the beekeeping industry has seen many changes.

The scientifically-designed Langstroth hives have superseded the straw "skeps" and gin-cases which housed the early bee
colonies. The English black bees have given way to the more docile Continental strains, and from the stationary hives of our forbears we have progressed to migratory beekeeping—first by horsedrawn vehicles and now by huge motor-trucks travelling through the night loaded with hives being transported to nectar-bearing areas.

PIONEERING PROBLEMS

It is recorded that bees were first introduced into New South Wales, by a Captain Wallace (or Willis) of the "Isabella" in April 1822, and into Tasmania by Dr. Wilson of the Royal Navy on the ship "Catherine Stewart Forbes" in 1831.

There is some doubt concerning the date of the first successful introduction into Western Australia. The first reference to bees appears in the diary of Captain J. Molloy who landed at the Swan River from the "Warrior" in 1830.

On December 1, 1829, he wrote:

Had the bees upon the deck. Inspected them and cleared out the hive and found a great number dead.

Mary Bussell who came to the Swan River Colony on the "James Pattison" in 1834, also attempted to bring a hive of bees from England but the following extracts from her letters and diary indicate some of the difficulties and disappointments she experienced.

Monday March 3, 1834.

I am very anxious about my bees. So many have died within the last day or two. According to Mr. Sherratt's advice, I have changed their food, perhaps tomorrow may render me more easy about them.

Tuesday, March 4, 1834.

I have cleared away all my poor dead bees. From the number, I believe very few more could be in the hive and I reproach myself for bringing them away, but to die at sea . . . . I have been obliged to remove the bees that are dead from the hive once or twice, since on one occasion a great many of the poor little things revived and at night returned to our scuttle—bees in every direction. Mama, Mr. Sherratt's children, and myself were dreadfully stung, nor did we succeed in saving any of them. The few we caught died before daylight when I got up to return them to the hive.

March 5, 1834, Cape Colony, Table Bay.

My bees have not swarmed and hundreds of them are dead, but yet I hope I may save sufficient to form a stock.

Apparently none of the bees survived the voyage for, in one of her letters to her mother, written after her arrival in the Swan River Colony, Mary Bussell refers to "Foot's dog and cat" as "the only live things" to be landed.

Writing in 1835, Captain Irwin states:

Bees have been landed at King George's Sound since our last report.

In his diary, first published in 1842, Mr. Geo. E. Moore, a former Advocate-General (who left the State on completing his first term of office in 1841) writes:

A species of the leafcutter bee is indigenous; but the honey storing bee has not been found, and I think, does not exist. Several attempts have been made to introduce the bee from England, but whether from the length of the voyage, or from want of proper management on arrival, they have been hitherto unsuccessful. This is to be regretted, as from the numerous honey-bearing flowers in the colony, there is not doubt of their succeeding well. Governor Hutt has offered a premium to the first successful introducer of them.

THE NAVY HELPS

The next record of bees in the Swan River Colony is found in a copy of the "Inquirer" dated November 11, 1846. In the long and involved sentences so dear to journalists of a bygone era we are told how the Royal Navy apparently succeeded where private individuals had failed. The paragraph reads as follows:

BEES

We are enabled to congratulate our settlers on the first swarm having taken place in the colony. The hive which the persevering patriotism, for after all there is no patriotism more true than that which seeks to introduce into new countries the foundations of future blessings; the persevering patriotism of Lt. Helpman, R.N., after more than one unsuccessful and discouraging attempt, succeeded in establishing at Fremantle, a hive which swarmed on Friday last, and, a new hive being in readiness, the young swarm was carefully secured and will we trust, found their own colonies through Western Australia "in saecula saeculorum." And here we really feel that we have a right to express the thanks of the colony to Lt. Helpman for his unceasing efforts on every voyage to bring some valuable addition to our colonial resources, and this in a class of subjects, as fruit trees, the silkworm, bees, etc., etc., requiring an anxious and skilful care, which can result only from the most warm and ruling desire to confer kindness and do service to the colony to which he is attached.
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Now, tracing back through the voyages of Lt. Helpman, it is apparent that he must have brought these bees into Western Australia either on June 12, 1846 when he returned from a voyage to Adelaide, or alternatively when he returned on March 2, 1846 from Sydney via Launceston. Unfortunately, there is no note of his cargo in the papers of that period, nor is his log of the period available.

It appears probable that the bees were introduced following upon his trip to Sydney, in which case the first really successful introduction of bees to Western Australia was on March 2, 1846.

In his book "Western Pioneers," the late Mr. Jesse Hammond, writes of an incident at Guildford in 1873 in the following words:

One afternoon, as I was returning from the Swan, I called at Mr. William Jones' home at Guildford. He was my uncle and had a very large bee farm, the only one in the colony at that time. He was a cooper by trade, and made little kegs to put his honey in, and casks for the colonists who made wine. He came to the colony in 1830 in the "Rockingham." That afternoon he gave me a swarm of bees, which he secured, as he thought—in a box with some honey.

I went off with this in the cart, and when I came to a stretch of smooth road over the Helena River Bridge, I started the horse into a trot, and the jolting of the cart upset the bees. They came out and attacked me in thousands, and I had to jump out of the cart and run.

Fortunately for me, there was a tree with a very bushy top, which had been cut down, and I crawled among the leaves for shelter. I could hear the horse galloping away with the cart, but did not dare move . . . . My face, hands, neck and arms were swollen to an enormous size . . . . but I had to keep on after the cart . . . . Three days later, I was quite well, and back at work again.

THE WAX MOTH APPEARS

The wax moth was reported in New South Wales in 1872 and this pest wiped out many colonies of the English black bees. Italian bees, which were better able to cope with the wax moth, were brought to Australia two years later.

During the "eighties," the wax moth killed out many colonies of the English bees.
black bees in Western Australia and the Italian strains were introduced—presumably from the Eastern States.

Bees had apparently spread widely throughout the State, for a press report on January 12, 1881 mentions that three gallons of honey were taken from a “bee-tree” in the Victoria Plains district.

Later in the same year, (September 6, 1881) it was reported that 16 cases of Swan River honey were sold in London.

**BEEKEEPING IN THE “NINETIES”**

Commercial beekeeping commenced to make headway during the last decade of the century. Between 1894 and 1896, Mr. John Ayer of the Mel-Bonum Apiary, North Perth was writing articles on apiculture for the Bureau of Agriculture’s Journal, and Mr. R. Helms, then the Bureau’s biologist also wrote several articles including one on American Foul Brood.

In 1896, Messrs. C. and A. Smith, two brothers from the York Peninsula, South Australia, arrived in this State with their bees. Using horse-drawn vehicles to move their hives from site to site, they became the first migratory beekeepers in Western Australia. The Smiths later engaged in large-scale wheat farming and in 1922 they sold their hives to the McNamara brothers of York who continued as large-scale honey producers.

Helping the Smiths at their Baker’s Hill apiary were two cousins, Arthur and Charles Cook, who had gained a knowledge of beekeeping by helping Arthur Cook’s father on his apiary at Smithfield, New South Wales.

The Cooks later moved to the Toodyay area to become commercial apiarists on a large scale. They owned the largest number of hives of any apiarists in Western Australia.

**BEEKEEPERS’ ASSOCIATIONS**

In 1900, the suggestion was put forward that a West Australian Beekeepers’ Association should be formed, and the first meeting of the Association was held on June 13, of that year when 16 members attended.

Branch associations were formed at Wagin and Albany a few years later, the latter being known as the Plantagenet Beekeepers’ Association.

Records show in 1903, there were beekeepers owning 3,100 colonies between them. Honey production in that year was given as 268,800 lb.

It is interesting to note that from that 3,150 hives in 1897, the honey production was 93,940 lb.

In 1955, from a total of 26,971 productive hives, the honey production was 6,366,000 lb. of honey or an average of over 236 lb. per hive.

**POTASH FOR PASTURES**

During 1953, farmers in Western Australia used only 30 tons of potash fertilisers on pastures. In 1955, the quantity used had jumped to 395 tons—more than 13 times the 1953 requirements.

The increased use of potash for pastures is a direct result of work carried out in recent years by officers of the Plant Research Division of the Department of Agriculture, and provides still another example of the value of scientific research to the practical farmer.

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