

# Principles of Beekeeping Backwards

*Bee Culture* – July, 2001

- Charles Martin Simon

## **10 Principles truly from another side of beekeeping**

I have established mystic contact with the spiritual core of apiculture, and now anything is possible. Some of you old timers might resonate with this statement, but most of you, I'm sure, will not have a clue. Many will be irritated by what you perceive to be my arrogance; but, you have it backwards. It is not arrogance; it is humility. I will attempt to enlighten but without – a technique gleaned from the gurus – giving up any trade secrets. That was a self-deprecating joke. I'm no guru. I view their antics with cynicism. What I am is a beekeeper with forty years experience and the ability to tell you what you're doing wrong.

Our apicultural forefathers, those great men who defined the principles of modern beekeeping, Langstroth, Dadants, Root . . . why were they so extravagantly successful? The answer is simple: because they didn't know what they were doing. They made it up, as it were, as they went along. That is the creative principle, and that is the way it works. Once the standards have been set and carved in stone, the pictures and diagrams and procedures etched into the books, we have then models to live up to, and we can't do it. Everything that comes after primary is secondary, or less. It will never be the same. For us to succeed, we have to become primary. We have to view beekeeping with entirely new eyes, just as our great pioneers did.

The more I studied beekeeping, the less I knew, until, finally, I knew nothing. But, even though I knew nothing, I still had plenty to unlearn. For we can never, and I do mean *never*, reiterate the ideals of the books, of history. How did Langstroth manage all his colonies without power tools? Especially when he was totally disabled for months and months. How did he do it? Simple again. He was crazy. Crazy people can do phenomenal things. The other side of insanity is genius.

I realized early on that if I followed the rules as written, I would fail. And how could anyone who knows better choose to fail? But it did take me a long time to figure that out. I started out just like everybody else, trying my best to go by the book.

It took me 20 years to get up the courage to sell my extractor, after it had taken me ten years to save up enough to buy it in the first place along with a truck with a shack on the back to serve as a portable extracting room. I was so stupid back then. I thought it was about honey. I'd read all the books, especially Ormand's, especially the part where he says, "Honey is money." I bought it hook, line, and sinker.

But don't get me wrong. I love Ormand. He's my friend. Acknowledged grand master of the game, third generation beekeeper, author of two great books on the subject, holder of the world's record in the GUINNESS BOOK OF RECORDS for the most honey produced by a single hive in a single season with a single queen, 404 pounds, a record that held from 1957 – 1963, when it was broken only with the use of multiple queens. Ormand's true, single-queen record will most likely never be even seriously challenged. But he doesn't keep bees anymore. The unthinkable happened. It was not that he got too old. He is very old, but he still works in carpentry. What happened was the mites wiped him out.

Ormand played by the rules. Bought the miticide and followed the directions. I bought the stuff too. But when I was handling it still sealed in foil, I could taste it in my gums, and it tasted toxic, so I didn't use it. So my bees died. But Ormand's bees died too. Besides, we were hearing reports from all around the nation that it was not working. But "they" were insisting that we use it anyway, the implication being if we didn't use it, we were part of the problem. But if we did use it, our bees still died. Year after year, I didn't use it. Year after year, I'd start

new swarms in the spring, only to have them die off in the fall and early winter. I didn't quit only because I couldn't. Then we heard the miticide was outlawed in Scandinavia.

Ormand listens to an inner voice. I respond to an inner impulse. It's not that I am against detail work. After all, I've written and currently maintain ten books in print. I've rewritten them all countless times – am still rewriting – do all the work, editing, designing, printing, cutting, binding by hand. But something rubbed me the wrong way about foundation from day one. My inner impulse very definitely didn't want me to use it. I learned how all right, used it for many years, even after I had unequivocally decided against it.

Then I invented my foundationless frames. I manufactured them by hand, with help from Ormand, because he appreciated the way they worked and wanted to be a part of it, and sold them all around the world for a few years, until the price of wood doubled, then tripled, and it ended up costing me more for the raw wood than I could sell the finished frames for. So I had to go out of business. But the point is, I paid the dues. I don't avoid work just to be avoiding it. By the same token, I don't do meaningless work just to be doing something. I'd rather do nothing than something meaningless.

The mass-productionization of bee culture is the single most damaging process in our world. The great pioneers of modern beekeeping created vast empires without knowing what they were doing. The motivating point was and always has been, how to get the most out for the least put in. Those great men had no idea what old fools they were, and how universally pernicious their principles would become.

Take the drone situation for example. They reasoned correctly that since it only took a few drones to fertilize the queens, this business of a colony supporting hundreds or even thousands of drones was wasteful. So great minds went to the drawing board and described a hexagonal cell base parameter based on worker-bee size, uniformly embossing foundation with this pattern, thereby rendering it more difficult for the colony to raise drones. A war developed between the colonies attempting to raise drones and the keepers attempting to subvert their natural inclination. The apotheosis of this process was reached with plastic worker brood foundation, making it impossible. But even then, the bees drew cross-comb and tried to raise their drones there. Human ingenuity and technology prevailed, and drone populations decreased, honey production increased, the practice was deemed brilliant, and worker foundation was simply another unquestioned standard of the industry.

The trouble is, *varroa* prefers drone brood. And when there's a dearth of drones, the dirty rotten parasite has no choice but to migrate into the worker cells. Drone brood trapping became *de rigeur* in Europe, but, apparently too labor intensive for the United States. Some intelligent manufacturers offer drone brood foundation but it hasn't caught on. The work ethic in this country is as follows: Do the minimum amount of work. What this means: just enough to keep from getting fired.

If I sound disgusted, it's because I am. When everything you learned is wrong, you either change or go down with the ship. I pray for the courage to change. Even though I am an old man, I understand the value of not being set in my ways.

Although I didn't like foundation from day one, it took me years to develop the fortitude to stop using it. And many more years after that before I was able to give up the pernicious addiction of extracting – years to give up the constant striving for “straight combs” that would lend themselves to the extracting process.

There are no straight lines in Nature, folks. Nature abhors symmetry. Sure, things look symmetrical, but they never are, not when you look close enough. Symmetry is a human interpretation, a desire, an illusion if you will. Appearance leading to idealization leading to the setting of hard-line standards is indeed a problem.

Fortunately I was clever enough, when the bees started dying off, to be able to orient my business to bee and yellow jacket removal. I became a remover as well as a keeper. So over the years of confronting wild colonies in all sorts of settings, I couldn't help but learn a few things, about myself as well as about them. One of the

main things I discovered was there was something in my mind always looking for straight lines. I came to believe it was a mental disease picked up from my teachers. To repeat for emphasis: You *never* find a straight comb in nature. I mean *never*. This should tell somebody something.

Charles Martin Simon's Ten Principles of Beekeeping Backwards:

**Principle #1:** Work with Nature, not against Her.

**Principle #2:** Profit doesn't mean a whole heck of a lot if you're dead.

Our forefathers postulated that bigger bees would make more honey. The bigger the bee, the more nectar and pollen she can carry. The bigger the cell, the more it can hold. And so forth. So they devised a larger worker cell size, and it became the standard.

**Principle #3:** Dead bees make no honey.

Anatomically bigger bees are metabolically slower bees, more prone to disease and predation. And the diseases did come. The industry standard is a sickly bee.

My encounters with feral bees have instilled in me a greater respect for bees and contempt for the way we usually deal with them.

I knew I was finished with beekeeping as we know it the day I read the publication of the great scientific discovery of the "housekeeping gene" in relation to survivability in regard to *Varroa*. That was exactly where my suspension of disbelief finally snapped, and I realized our industry is directed by madmen. They have been driven mad by the fear of death and simultaneously compelled irresistibly toward it. Death of our beloved bees. Death of our beloved industry. Death of ourselves.

The Asian bee, the historic host for the mite, the bee that has coexisted with it successfully for a million years, does not usually inhabit enclosures. It hangs out in the open. This leads to the conclusion that when the mite drops off, it falls into the void, which is a good place for it. The immature Asian bee spends less time in the cell, which gives the mite less time to do its dirty work. Those are the keys, not the "housekeeping gene", never mind what the "scientists" have to say. But I am not meaning to imply that this "gene" does not exist. I'm questioning its interpretation. Just as I question the interpretation of the "bee dance". The traditional interpretation of the bee dance is destroyed categorically by the observation of one single factor: The human observer observes from above. The bee dances face to face on a lateral plane. What the bee perceives and what the human perceives are two entirely different things. I grant that the dance occurs. I do not grant that it communicates anything at all. It is a sharing of excitement. The knowledge of where the nectar or whatever is is deeper than that. The colony is a manifestation of generations integrated with the patterns of the environment. There is a great mind at play that humans are generally incapable of comprehending.

Another significant factor in the retardation of *Apis mellifera* is the chronic abuse perpetrated by the teachings of the art. Colonies left to their own devices have an entirely different consciousness than domesticated varieties. Domestic bees are constantly messed with. A colony is a unified Mind. When it is opened and manipulated, the thought process is jumbled. When it is smoked, it must turn its attention to other things. Stress is good. Stress is bad. It depends on the kind. Exercise is stress. Getting beat up is stress. One event can build self-esteem; the other can destroy it. But the effects are reversible, based on other conditions, the most significant of which being how the subject interprets the experience. There are many variables.

The skill with which one messes with a hive has a great deal to do with the effect the messing is going to have on the future. The master manipulator will do it so that the bees will never even notice anything happening. Indeed, they will proceed with their process as though nothing was happening at all. The quality, quantity, and

kind of mentality of the manipulator have everything to do with this. Some beekeepers make bees nervous just by showing up in the proximity of a hive. Woe be unto those keepers and their bees if they light the smokers and crack the hive lids. Beekeeping should be licensed, and I should be the licensing entity. There would be very few beekeepers. Again I need to point out: This is not arrogance, it is humility. For I truly have your best interests and the best interests of the bees at heart.

**Principle #4:** Don't fight it.

When I think of all the years I've spent fighting ants and all the techniques I've employed, I don't know whether to laugh or cry. Right now I've got naked honey comb and open bowls of honey in my kitchen, and plenty of ants too, but they're leaving the honey alone. How come? Because I don't fight them. I feed them. There is a bowl of honey on the counter established for them, where they can come and get all they want. At first they were hitting it heavily, then they lost interest. Apparently, if they can't have it, they want it. If they can have all they want, they don't want it.

**Principle #5:** Beekeeping is not about honey.

**Principle #6:** It's not about money.

**Principle #7:** It's about survival.

Well, actually, it's not about survival, since nobody survives. It's about the quality of life while you're alive. Do your best to make the bees' life the best it can be and it will be the best it can be for you. Stop thinking "maximum production". Substantially less than most is way better than nothing at all. Learn how to leave the bees alone. Benign neglect is the way. Provide them with appropriate cavities. Standard beehives, if they're right, are acceptable habitations for bees, but don't use foundation.

In addition to the size consideration, foundation is contaminated. Only the oldest, most used wax gets rendered into foundation. Old wax absorbs and retains contaminants such as pesticide. Go ahead, use frames. Frames do make it easier to perform manipulations. But actually, just the top bars are enough, at least for brood chambers. Further up the hive, you might want complete frames for the definition of the bottom bars, to maintain the space between the top of the frame below and the bottom of the frame above.

I have 15 hives as of this writing (December 2000), after years of having none at this time of year. How did I do it? I don't know, and that's the answer. As the years have progressed, I have tried more and more to keep them as close to wild as possible, to not mess with them. I do harvest some honey, pollen, and propolis, but I do it with a leave-alone attitude. I am hoping for their well being. Beyond that I am asking nothing from them, expecting nothing. If they are prospering I add supers. If they make extra honey, I take some. When my combs are crooked and stuck across several frames, I use bee escapes to clear the supers before removing.

I crush the combs and strain them through a system of perforated plastic buckets. I keep quite a few cut combs around to eat au naturel. The wilder, more funky combs may very well be the best.

I've been reluctant in recent years to invest money in equipment, because of the *Varroa* situation. Consequently, I'm using old equipment a normal beekeeper would have thrown out a long time ago – In fact quite a bit of it has been thrown out by normal beekeepers – and I'm liking it better and better the worse it gets.

I'm thinking about running hives without bottoms and up on stands this season, at least during the warm months, and considering designing a bottom board to catch and destroy mites.

**Principle #8:** Forget everything you ever learned and start observing what is really going on.

In regard to this last principle. One of the first injunctions I received starting out was to keep accurate records. But I realized that accurate records would be obfuscations at best. When you refer to a notebook describing the events of a hive to date, you will not see the hive as it actually is. The level of information that can be cataloged is not vital, has nothing to do with what's going on with the hive in question, and prevents you from seeing what is.

Furthermore, I have observed that the harder you fight to keep your bees alive, the faster they die. Cut them loose, give them freedom, the freedom to die as well as the freedom to live, and they live better.

**Principle #9:** Leave your bees alone.

**Principle #10:** Leave me alone.

Sure, I'm crazy, and proud of it.

