

Nick Wallingford
Box 2067
Rotorua NZ

MY DAD WAS A BEEKEEPER

"My Dad was a beekeeper."

How many times when talking with people and mentioning bees I hear those words or similar ones. "My Uncle kept bees" or more rarely "Grandma used to have beehives." Words spoken with a kind of wistful respect and often accompanied by some apicultural exploit.

"He used to just let them crawl all over his arms and they never stung him."

"She used to say how the first year she had the bees they filled over two hundred sections, every one of them perfectly capped."

"He told me about how heavy the jumbo boxes he started with were, but I only saw them later, after they had been retired to be planter boxes."

I enjoy hearing these little stories and feel a sort of common thread in the memories of quite differing people. It seems many people have had this contact with beekeeping at some time in their life. The farmer whose grandparents were farmers, and the city dweller who remembers the hives down in the garden -- both recall, often with a look of awe and pride, a relative who was both in touch with a hidden order and slightly eccentric, as those who don't share the fascination of beekeeping ~~some-may~~ ~~time~~ see it.

I've always been able to reply in kind, because my Dad was a beekeeper, too.

He never had more than a few hives, and he'd probably be described by some as a mere bee-haver, as he didn't actively manipulate the hive much. Honey wasn't the main purpose of having the hive, though I do remember extracting time one warm summer night of my growing up. All the neighborhood kids crowding around, chewing on bits of wax and honey, watching and tasting.

The hives I remember from my childhood were always out in the garden, white painted boxes set up on concrete blocks, the mysterious activity on the alighting board and the repeated admonitions to not stand in their flight path. Summer days we would catch bees in jars to look at them more closely.

He seemed to keep the beehives mostly for the swarms and I don't think he could feature his garden without them. New boxes and the sweet smell of foundation wax would appear and in due time he would see or hear of a swarm. After hiving it and making sure it was well established he would give it to some beekeeper-in-the-making to get him started. I don't know how many times he did that over the years.

When the time came, several years after I left home to make my own life, he gave me my first hive, helping me to screen the entrance, staple the boxes together and lift it into the trunk of the car. I carefully set it up in my own garden and started to learn about bees and beekeeping. When I was preparing to leave for New Zealand several years later he made a point of letting me know that he was glad that I was going, ~~that he was glad that I was going,~~ that he thought it would be good for me.

I hope he took pride in telling his friends that his son was a beekeeper.

On a trip back to the U.S. he had me organize the extracting with the brand new two frame extractor and electric uncapping knife he had bought. I can clearly remember the three of us out in the garage -- me with the knife and handling the full boxes of honey, him turning the handle and assuring me it wasn't tiring him, and my Mom running the strong dark honey into an odd assortment of jars collected from cupboards and neighbors.

And then this last year when I made the sudden trip back to be with him for the month before he died. Many things were still left unsaid but the memories of two beekeepers talking together of boxes of honey and swarms will stay with me all my life.

When I talk with someone and they say that their father was a beekeeper, I feel a closeness to them and to my Dad, too. All the stories he told me, and the fine example for living he gave me, a good man always willing to help others. The man who gave me my interest in bees and so much else.

My Dad was a beekeeper.

14 June 1981

Momma —

This is something I've been thinking about writing ever since I got back in January. I wasn't sure how I'd feel toward it, once I did write it, but I've decided I don't feel so personally attached as I thought I might; I'll probably decide to share it with others as a magazine article for "Gleanings".

But I wanted you to have the first copy, anyway.

Winter settling in — mostly just mild but wet so far. Hoping to go to Queenstown in late July for the Beekeepers' Conference. Avel and I still together, closer every day. Not much else for news, really.