

Bees were a topic of news in 1906, as well as in the years before and after. The settlers seem to have had a great taste for honey, maybe not unlike our craving for sugar today. They liked the sweetness of the honey and used the wax of the comb for candles.

The honey bee is not a native North American insect but introduced into this country by the Europeans. The bee found the forests and plains to their liking and spread westward, ahead of the settlers. The Indians called the bee the "white man's fly." This bee gave Ozarkers food, light, sport, and material for storytelling.

John C. Thompson of Crocker announced that he would celebrate his eighty-first birthday on October 27, 1906 by cutting down a bee tree and invited everybody to witness the event (*Pulaski County Democrat*, October 12.) No doubt Mr. Thompson had spent a lifetime "lining" bees and it seemed an appropriate way to celebrate his longevity.

Finding the bee tree was the first part of getting that honey. One way was to go down to the river and find a bee on the water. After he had his fill, he would go straight to the bee tree.

Another way is to punch some holes in a syrup bucket, hang it, and wait for the bees to find it. When they get loaded up, they will head straight for

the bee tree. You could also bait the bees with sugar water, honey, or part of a honeycomb.

A bee hunter near Duke, Ed Chaney, reported his bait as consisting of a pie pan containing sugar water. Take a pencil size stick, dip one end in a bottle of sweet anise. Stick the unscented end into an old piece of hornet nest comb. The comb floats in the sugar water and the scent from the sweet anise on the stick wafts through the air, attracting the bees to the sugar water.

Bees go straight to the tree. That straight path is call a beeline. Those who were good at following the bees to the hive in the tree were called "bee coursers" or, locally, "tracers." The main requirement for being a good bee tracer is excellent eyesight.

S. C. Turnbo (*The White River Chronicles of S. C. Turnbo*) recounts several exploits of a locally famous bee hunter by the name of Bill Clark:

"Referring to his renown as a bee hunter, a settler who lived on White River sent for him [Bill Clark] one day to find a bee tree that he and others failed to locate. When Clark arrived several men were sitting around watching the bees sip the bait. Some



Beelining and Bee Gums

timber prevented the men from getting the proper direction the bees came and went. Bill seated himself to watch the bees for a few minutes, then he stationed himself on the bank of the river.

He soon discovered that they flew across the river (his eyesight was so good he could see the flight of a bee a long distance. After getting the direction the bees flew, he prepared to locate their home. Every man in the crowd had his eyes on Clark, for he was acknowledged to be a great bee hunter.

Soon he noticed a bee heavily laden, which flew very slow. Bill watched it intently and said to the men, "Look, boys, look, look, look, boys, look. Into a tree it went, by jacks." His eyes had followed the bee into the face of a bluff on the opposite side of the river and saw it go into a tree. The men crossed the river in a canoe and discovered the bees in the tree Bill had named. He had located the tree in less than half an hour, where others had hunted for days and failed to find."

Finding the bee tree is the easiest part of getting wild honey. Cutting down the tree requires some skill. Theodore Pease Russell was an early settler in the Belleview Valley in southeast

Missouri. His first experience at a bee cutting, as he called cutting down a bee tree, is related in *A Connecticut Yankee in the Frontier Ozarks*:

"I well remember my first experience in them. There was a family of young men who lived over back of Shepherd Mountain. They were all of them good bee hunters. They had found some half dozen bee trees. So they invited all the young folks, boys and girls, to come up to the bee cutting. On the day appointed quite a company gathered at the house, and after a good dinner, we all started for the woods, armed with axes and with buckets to hold the honey, as some of the trees were a mile or two from the house. We had a good time, helping the girls over the logs and ditches and up and down the mountains.

After reaching the tree, the best axemen were chosen to cut the tree down. Now there is quite an art in cutting a tree down so as not to break a tree all to pieces, for every bee tree is supposed to be very hollow and full of honey. In order to get it down as easy as possible, we cut it so it will fall on another tree, or on young trees, which breaks the force of the fall. Sometimes the tree will break all to pieces and

throw the honey all around, and a great deal of it will be lost. If the tree is badly broken, the bees nearly always give up at once and act as though it was of no use to fight; all was lost. But let the tree come down without breaking, then look out! The bees will fight for their homes and honey as long as there is hope. Now for an axeman to walk in among those angry bees is not a very safe business, and to cut a hole in the tree with thousands of bees all over oneself is no child's play. Just take an axe and go to a bee gum and strike it once or twice and you will find out something about cutting bee trees.

I shall never forget a tree we cut that day. I was one of the axemen. Two of us walked along on the tree and began to cut away the side of the tree that covered the honey. As soon as we let daylight in on the honey, the whole colony came pouring out and such running and screaming, with the bees after the boys and girls! I tell you I never saw better time made than some of those girls made that day; dry goods were of no account. I never saw store goods go off so fast in my life. Bees, like human beings will fight for their property just as long as the honey is not broken, but as soon as they see the honey broken

they give up and will fight no man. I have felt a kind of sympathy for the bees. Imagine yourself with a good home with all the comforts of life—everything to make life enjoyable; then let some despoiler come and break into your house and take away all the comforts and see how you would feel.

I very well remember I paid very dearly for the sweets I got; the bees just lit all over my head. I wiped them off my face by the handful. They stung me all over my head, face and

neck, until I was spotted as one with the measles. I thought they would sting me to death! Ah, didn't I suffer? And yet my face and head did not swell up as I had expected it would. We always have a remedy at hand for all stings if we only think to use it—one of nature's own. After building a fire of leaves, we smoked those bees and finally got their honey, for the tree was very rich."

If a tracer finds a bee tree, he carves

an "X" on the tree. The honor system prevails and prevents others from robbing the tree. There are some Pulaski locals who keep an eye out for a wild swarm of bees so that they can capture them. They take a hive with them. If the queen is caught and put in a hive, the rest will follow.

Both Theodore Pease Russell and S. C. Turnbo remarked that in their time, in the early days, bees and bee trees seemed to be everywhere. They lamented that by their old age, in the latter part of the 19th century, most of the good bee hunting was gone. Now, in the 21st century, it seems there is not much buzz about bee hunting.



Catching a swarm and keeping bees was another way to procure honey. Early settlers kept their bees in hollow sections of black gum trees, hence the name bee gum. A board was placed on top of the bee gum and the bees entered through holes in the side or carved out at the bottom, as in those above. Photo by Vance Randolph. Courtesy of College of the Ozarks.

Further Reading

A Connecticut Yankee in the Frontier Ozarks - The Writings of Theodore Pease Russell, Edited by James F. Keefe and Lynn Morrow, University of Missouri Press, 1988.

The White River Chronicles of S. C. Turnbo - Man and Wildlife on the Ozarks Frontier, Edited by James F. Keefe and Lynn Morrow, University of Arkansas Press, 1994.