

# Buzz Words



Stephen Dean

**O**rmond Aebi views our world in terms of bees. He points to a grove of eucalyptus a mile away. "When those trees bloom, find a hollow branch that you can reach, pull it down and smash it between your hands," he says, clapping his hands. "Then lick them. It's the sweetest taste! It's next to heaven. And you can go the next day, and there's just as much again."

The sweet nectar that the trees produce is like ambrosia for honeybees. Ormond only regrets that there aren't more of the little creatures in the world. "Tons of honey never gets produced for want of bees and beekeepers," he remarks. "It's such a waste."

Ormond and his father Harry, however, have always done their share. They are, undisputedly, the world's greatest beekeepers. And an entry in the *Guinness Book of World Records* affirms it: they produced the most honey in one year from a single hive—an amazing 404 pounds.

Sixty-four year old Ormond has worked with bees all his life. His father, who at 89 still takes an active part in the tending of the hives, taught him a most valuable lesson: you've got to learn to think like the bees. Ormond explains: "These little fellows have been making honey for thousands of years. You're not going to make them change. *You* have to change to meet their needs."

Some of the changes that they have instituted concern the hive itself. The Aebis never paint their hives, preferring the natural colors of redwood. In winter they insulate the

top with cedar chips to draw out any moisture, and they cover the entire hive with cardboard to reduce heat loss. In the middle of December, when most hives are nearly dormant, Ormond's bees are active and still producing honey.

Each of the five hives is astir with the coming and going of bees. One lands with a load of pollen on each back leg and is approached by another bee at the entrance. "That's it; check her out," Ormond says. "That one's a guard—he makes sure that no bees from another hive come in and steal honey."

Another bee alights and dances around the small entrance platform. "Now that one must be a youngster. See how he struts around making a big fuss before he goes in," he explains, smiling. "I can tell just about what's going on inside the hive by watching the entrance for a while."

The most significant changes that the Aebis have made in beekeeping have to do with the keeper himself; how he handles and treats his diminutive charges. The Aebis disturb the bees as seldom as possible—rarely opening the hive and never in the winter. They never take honey that the bees need for themselves; they always wait until there is an excess.

The honey is stored above the main brood chamber where the bees live and breed. The brood chamber is covered with a grill called a queen excluder to prevent the queen from moving up and continuing to breed in the upper chambers. This storage chamber—or "super"—is constructed basically like the lower one.

A series of honeycombs are arranged in vertical rows—the Aebis use combs of pure beeswax exclusively. When the combs are full, another super is inserted between the full super and the brood chamber. As each super fills another is inserted below.

It's important always to leave the bees enough honey, however. "Never steal their honey," Ormond asserts. "Bees are the most honest little creatures in God's creation. If you help them along they'll never miss it when you take off the top supers."

Ormond has learned that contented bees not only produce more honey, but they also don't sting. Neither he nor his father ever wear those awkward creations called bee-suits. "The last thing a honeybee wants to do is sting you," explains Ormond. "They only do it because they're frightened or offended."

Ormond surrounds his hives with a tall fence because bees get nervous in an open area. He wears green clothes, a natural color. The yard is cluttered for a more natural setting. "I keep it junky," he says. "The bees just seem to like it better."

Ormond hangs "wave clothes" made from old clothes on poles near the hives. The constant overhead flapping of these accustoms the bees to motion and human scent near their flyways.

There are some things that inexplicably offend honeybees and must be avoided. Woolen clothes are definitely out—bees will attack an old wool shirt or cap repeatedly. "They like sheep well enough," remarks Ormond, "but they just don't like processed wool." Some perfumes also send bees into a fury.

So many people have sought the Aebi's advice that Ormond wrote a book entitled *The Art and Adventure of Beekeeping*. It contains meticulous instructions on starting a hive and maintaining it for maximum honey production. It is also a treasury of stories about Ormond's rewarding lifetime with his beloved friend, the honeybee.

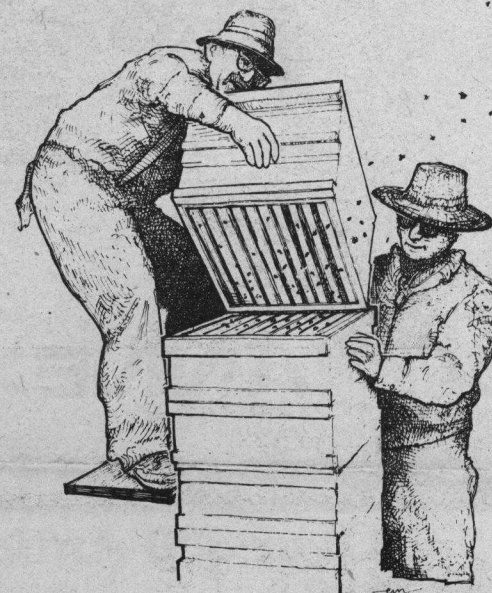
The Aebis' second book, *Mastering the Art of Beekeeping*, is a guide for the advanced student who may want to shoot for their world's record.

Since Ormond and Harry Aebi moved into town, they no longer strive to break their own records. But in their unlikely location—busy 17th Avenue to the front and Del Mar School to their back—they still produced over half a ton of honey from just five hives. They harvested 262 pounds from their best hive compared to a normal average of 40 pounds.

Ormond is convinced that beekeeping can be rewarding for anyone with interest and dedication. "People ask me—'Ormond, do you really think I could keep bees?'—and I just tell them to give it a try. Read my books; read them two or three times. And I'm always willing to help people if they have questions."

One of the Aebis' students produced 322 pounds of honey from a hive this last year. "People wonder if I worry that someone will break our record. I tell them: 'Rejoice! I hope they do.'"

Nothing goes to waste from the hives, either. The "capping" honey used to cap off the combs is jarred and sold; some people buy it to sooth allergies. The beeswax is melted down and sold. A small amount of propolis—a bee



ILLUSTRATIONS: ERIC MATHES

glue used to seal any cracks in the hive—is also garnered. Propolis is made into pills in Europe and marketed as a sort of allergy "vaccine."

European scientists are also experimenting with bee-venom therapy for arthritis patients; a treatment that the Aebis have long used themselves. "When I feel a little stiffness, I put a bee on the joint and get it to sting me, and the pain goes right away," Ormond maintains. "It's so hard to me to get stung, though, that I have to pinch the little fellow."

Ormond and Harry live at 710 17th Avenue where their books are available for sale. But don't expect to get any honey. Even though they only sell it out of their home jar by jar, all thousand and some odd pounds are sold out. As Ormond would say: "Rejoice!"

