

BICENTENNIAL BEES

Early Records of Honey Bees in the Eastern United States

Part I

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THERE is only a small amount of information available in one place, i.e., Pellett (1938), about the introduction of honey bees (*Apis mellifera* L.) into the United States and their westward spread from the Atlantic Coast Colonies. I have spent many hours searching the written accounts of explorers, naturalists, early settlers and historians for accounts concerning early beekeeping. Most of the references available to me did not have any mention of honey bees. Surrey (1916) and Post (1933) bear out my experience for they both said that they were unable to find any references to honey bees in the literature bearing on the French colonial period in Louisiana from 1699-1763. There may be ships' manifests available, in England, Holland and Spain, for example, that would provide information on bee shipments. However, Hunter (1792) [in England] stated that while he was aware that honey bees were now found in America, he had no knowledge of how the colonies were transported. Some possible sources of information may be in state archives or county records, but these are not on library loan. The lack of positive information seems odd because during the 1600's and 1700's sugar was scarce and expensive.

Maple sugar and sirup, honey and molasses were the only sweetening agents that might be generally available. Of these only honey could be used without some form of processing. Alcoholic drinks were widely used in the early days of this country, so I think that honey for the manufacture of mead would have been in demand. A few colonies of bees on a farm or in

the backyards of the villagers would have been a fairly cheap and simple way of providing a desirable sweet.

Probably no one knows when, where, how many, and by whom colonies or hives of honey bees were brought to this country. Oertel (1945) reported that the Virginia Company wrote a letter dated December 5, 1621, that said in part "... wee have by this



Possible westward routes of migration of honey bees, adapted from Parkes (1953).

Editor's Note — This is the first of a series of several installments on Eastern U.S. Beekeeping History written by Dr. Everett Oertel, retired apiculturist, Entomology Research Division, Agricultural Research Service, Bee Breeding Laboratory, Baton Rouge, La. We feel this series is especially timely since this is our Bicentennial year. Although this first installment deals with U.S. beekeeping history in general, following issues will go into discussions of individual states' beekeeping histories.

shippe sent . . . fruit trees, as also pigeons, . . . and bee hives, . . . the preservation and increase hereof wee recommend unto you."¹ It is likely that the hives were landed early in 1622 for sailing vessels took two or three months to cross the Atlantic Ocean. I assume that at least some of the colonies were alive when they were taken ashore. The reader may question whether honey bees could have been shipped successfully from England to America. If the attempts were made in the winter it is reasonable to assume that at least some of the colonies could have arrived alive. Neighbor (1866) tells of hives of bees that he shipped to Australia that arrived alive after 79 days on board ship. He also sent hives of bees to New Zealand in 1840. Gates (1909) reported that honey bees were brought to New England (perhaps by 1638), but the exact time and place was not known. Gates then goes on to say that Haydn (1904) gives the date of 1670 when bees were introduced into Boston.² A number of shiploads of livestock were sent to the Plymouth Colony between 1630 and 1638. Honey bees might have been included. I had access to the microfilm of Josselyn's³ (1674) book about his two voyages from England to New England. There is no mention of honey bees in his account of his first trip, which was made in 1638. The description of his second trip, made in 1663, contains the following general statement, ". . . which brings me to the insects . . . as first the honey bee, which are carried over by the English and thrive there exceedingly; . . ." I did not find any comment about honey or mead. I am inclined to think that Josselyn did not know of any honey bees in New England at the time of his first visit. The only other fairly reliable record for an importation of bees is provided by Bartram (1792).⁴ While he was visiting a Dr. Grant in Mobile, Alabama, in 1775, he was told that there was one hive of bees in the city. It had been ". . . lately brought from Europe." Unfortunately, Bartram did not provide additional information.

We can speculate briefly about the westward movement of honey bees from the East Coast — over or around the Appalachian Mountains, across the Midwest, to and across the Mississippi River. The accompanying map shows the most feasible routes for swarms to take, whether natural swarms or box hives transported by man. The northern route is by way of the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers, the second is by way of the Ohio River, the third by way of the Cumberland Gap, the fourth

around the southern end of the Appalachian Mountains and the fifth along the Gulf Coast.

For many years after their importation honey bees had to obtain pollen and nectar almost entirely from non-cultivated, native plant species. Fields of corn were small and scattered; there were no fields of clover, alfalfa and other cultivated species that today's beekeeper depends upon. Widely distributed plant species that provided pollen and nectar probably were: maple, elm, willow, blackberry, wild fruit trees, tulip tree, basswood, oak, pine, tupelo gum, locust, sumac, clethra, holly, gallberry, palmetto, huckleberry, hazel nut, sunflower, vines, milkweed, boneset, goldenrod and aster.

FOOTNOTES

¹Taken from S. M. Kingsbury, ed. The records of the Virginia Company of London, vol. 3, 1933, documents 1607-1622. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²Haydn does not give any details for the 1670 date.

³Josselyn, J. An account of two voyages to New England, 215 p., Giles Widdows, London. (Microfilm 3009, reel 212) I think that Josselyn stayed pretty close to the coast, away from the frontier. He did not say that he actually saw the farm animals and crops that he wrote about in his diary.

⁴William Bartram, 1739-1823, was an early American botanist. He traveled and collected plant specimens in the eastern and southern part of what is now the United States. He sold specimens to Europeans who were interested in the flora of the New World. For a number of years he was Botanist to King George III.

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