

MEMOIR

Honey Bees, Birch Sap and Candy

Sidney Saylor Farr

Dad, Grandpa and several of my uncles each kept five or six hives of bees. Most of Dad's hives were homemade except for one pretty blue one; it looked so elegant and out of place sitting there in the row. I have often wished that I had asked him where he ever got such a pretty thing as that blue hive.

Black gum trees are almost always hollow near the ground and can be made into excellent bee gums. Dad would cut a black gum and saw the trunk into appropriate lengths. Then he would hollow out the pieces, using a long chisel to round out and smooth down the insides. After this was done he bored four holes, one at each point of the compass, and put two sticks horizontally through the gum, at right angles to each other, the ends of the sticks resting in the holes. These sticks were the supports from which bees could suspend their brood combs. The bees always chose the top half of the gum for their honey, suspending the combs from the head set on top of the bee gum. Dad put a flat head on first and then slanted a lid above the first to keep rain from running into the gum. He set the bee gums on a raised platform several inches off the ground. Last of all he cut a small half-circle (somewhat like mouse holes in comic strips and the animated, "Tom & Jerry") in the bottom edge, thus making an entryway for the bees.

I have read that one of the more important and ancient foods in the wilds was honey. The English brought the honeybee to America in the early 1600s. The settlers took colonies of bees with them as they moved west, and swarms escaped, returning to the wilderness, from whence they had been captured thousands of years before. If you found a bee tree, even if it was on someone else's land, and you marked it, it was yours. Of course you had to get permission from the landowner to cut the tree. When any of the Saylor men found a bee tree they cut two parallel vertical slashes in the bark. This mark let anyone else in the community know the Saylor had claimed this tree.

Since most of the mountains where we lived was "company land," Dad did not have to get permission. Bees begin to swarm around the first of April. If they swarm in late June, they will not have time necessary to collect enough honey to see them through the winter.

To fill new bee gums, Dad would go “coursing” the wild bees. He put corncobs soaked in honey in a cleared spot in the woods, sat down nearby and waited for the bees to find the bait. Soon dozens of bees were attracted to the spot. When they rose up to fly home he noted the direction and followed. It might take several baits placed out before he could find the bee tree.

Dad cut bee trees early in the spring when there was plenty of blossom from which they could make new honey. The day before this targeted time he would carry a new bee gum and set it in place near the tree. Early the next day he and his helper (who was me, when I got big enough) carried a cross-cut saw, axe, and a tub or large bucket in which to place the honey from the tree. Dad would notch the tree to get it to fall in a certain direction.

After the tree fell, using a bee-smoker, in which he burned old rags to make clouds of smoke, he puffed billows of smoke around, which would make the bees settle. He also wore a mask and gloves as protection, although I did not think the bees would sting him. Dad remarked that bees could tell if a person was afraid; I tried not to be afraid but never quite succeeded; sometimes I did get stung.

Dad brought the bee gum and positioned it near the fallen tree. If a tree was hollow, sometimes it split lengthwise when it fell, making his task simpler. He usually made a cut two or three feet above the hole where the bees were and another the same distance below, then split a place along the grain, exposing the honey. Inside would be nothing but chaos, dead bees, smashed honey chambers, and then the frightened bees.

Lifting out a piece of honeycomb, he put it inside the hive. Then he took out what honey he could salvage. In the process he could usually find the queen bee and would set her near the hole in the bee gum. The attendant bees swarmed around her, and soon they all crawled into the hole. We let the bees settle overnight and then early next morning Dad went for them. He plugged up the hole and put a sheet over the bee gum to keep the bees inside while he carried it home. It was marvelous how well the bees survived the trauma and how quickly they set to work building new combs and filling the fresh cells with honey.

When the bee gum got overcrowded the bees swarmed, one of the queens would leave, taking a portion of the worker bees with her to a new home. I asked Dad how he always knew when it was time for them to swarm.

“It is simple,” he replied, “all you have to do is watch for the signs. Nothing happens in nature without a sign being given.”

Taking me to a hive he said, "Look at the pattern of bees outside on the front." Looking closer I could see bees clinging to the outside in the shape of a horseshoe. "Within three days that hive will swarm unless something is done to relieve the congestion," he said.

With modern beehives another compartment, called a "super," can be set on top, and the bees will move up into it and start making honey there. Homemade gums could not be adapted that way, so Dad watched for the bees to swarm and tried to settle them down near a new bee gum.

When we needed honey Dad took it from the hives, but seldom more than once a year. We spoke of it as robbing the bees, and in a way that is exactly what we were doing. Dad liked to take honey during the new moon in June. This gave the bees plenty of time to replenish the honey before cold weather had a chance to set in.

Sometimes on a country road outside Berea, I see bees around a water hole and watch them rise, circle to get their bearings and then take off, heading for their hives or bee trees. Sometimes, feeling very nostalgic, I mourn as I remember the many times Dad coursed the bees and brought wild honey to our table.

Birch Sapping in June

A favorite excursion when I was a child was to go birch sapping. Every year during the first new moon in June, Mama and Aunt Mossy took us birch sapping. Mama said it was best if taken during the first new moon in June. We always looked for a tree that was at least twenty-four inches in diameter, because a smaller tree would die if you removed too much bark (Dad always cut the bark and stripped it away in a complete circle around any tree that he wanted to kill in order to clear new ground for a patch of corn). We carried buckets, spoons, and a hatchet or long sharp knife when we set out.

We elected a tree at least 24 inches in diameter. Using a hatchet or sharp knife, we cut a square or rectangular outline in the bark. After the patch was outlined, we took a flat knife and inserted it under the bark all along the edges. When the piece was loosened so that we could get our fingers under the edges, we stripped it from the tree. Then we used a large tablespoon to scrape the fiber from the inside of the bark (doing this as soon as each piece was taken from the tree). The long strips of sappy fiber were dropped into a pail where we had put clear, sweet, spring water. Getting it into the water quickly was to keep the fiber from turning dark. When we had enough for our purposes, we

added 1/2-cup sugar and let the mixture stand for about an hour or so in a cool place (we did not have refrigeration at that time). We drained off the liquid and we had a delightful summertime drink. We also ate the sap.

Birch Sap and Candy

We did not often make candy when I was a child because we had little money to buy sugar. We used honey and molasses for sweetening in most of our baked products. We made molasses taffy and molasses butter.

I read about people tapping sugar maples in New England and boiling down the juice into maple syrup. This sounded fascinating.

Birch Sap Operation

One spring, I decided to tap a birch tree. I have always loved the delicate flavor of birch and wondered how it would taste boiled down into candy. Early one morning, I bored a small hole into the tree trunk and inserted a hollow tube made by slipping a round of bark from a tree limb. I hung a small bucket under the tube and waited patiently for the sap to start flowing. But it dripped so slowly that I lost patience and left it there and went home. Several hours later, I went back to check and found about half a cup of liquid. Carefully pouring this into a jar, I again went home to wait a while longer.

Just before it got dusky dark, I went back to the birch tree and found another half cup of liquid. I carried the liquid home. To make the candy I added about 2 cups of sugar to the cup of birch sap and poured it into a kettle to boil.

When a small amount of hot liquid was dropped into cold water and formed a soft ball, I considered it was done. I poured it onto a flat oiled surface. When the candy partly cooled but before it hardened, I marked the surface in squares. I made the marks deep so that the candy could be broken along the line when it was cold.

It looked like a clear sheet of ice. The result was great; my sisters and brothers loved the birch candy as much as I did.