

# Honeybees Crossing America

IT TOOK HONEYBEES 230 YEARS TO CROSS AMERICA FROM THE ATLANTIC TO THE PACIFIC, BUT DESPITE ALL THE DIFFICULTIES, THEY'VE REMAINED AN ENDURING SYMBOL OF INDUSTRY, THRIFT, AND HARMONY.

By Gregory LeFever



The New World proved as challenging for honeybees as it was for Europeans seeking new lives in America. Whether crossing the vast Atlantic or Great Plains, honeybees confronted unforgiving landscapes, harsh extremes in temperature, and diseases that ravaged their population.

But even as they suffered their tribulations, honeybees in early America became symbols of industry, inspiring settlers carving farms, villages, towns and cities from the wilderness. Known by

some Native Americans as “white man’s flies,” bees provided honey to the colonial diet. Their wax made fragrant candles and was used in sewing, tanning hides, making furniture, and dozens of other functions. And, as always, honeybees flew hither and yon, becoming the most important crop pollinators for the expanding nation.

Since the days of Columbus, the word throughout Europe was that America was the new Canaan, the “land of milk and honey.” But when the first Europeans actually arrived, they found no cows for milk and no bees for honey.

While the historical record is vague, honeybees probably first arrived in America in 1622 aboard an English ship destined for Virginia with cargo including pigeons, rabbits, mastiff dogs “and Beehives.” In the Massachusetts Bay Colony, new shiploads of Puritans in the 1630s arrived with New England’s first honeybee hives fastened to the rear of the decks, as far away from crew and passengers as possible during the long sea voyage.

## Skeps, Trees and Bee Gums

Europe’s beekeepers for centuries had used skeps – lightweight, dome-shaped hives they made of coiled straw – that quickly became familiar sights in America wherever Europeans established new communities. By the 1640s, beehives began appearing on household inventories, and colonial “good wives” added tending





beehives to their list of household and garden chores.

Early honeybees brought here from Europe were German bees, a breed known for their hardiness and nasty temperament. They had black bodies, which created some confusion for Native Americans. A bit of folklore from early Massachusetts tells of an Indian warrior who spied a skep and its busy bees and muttered about colonists taming horses and oxen to perform labor – both being animals unknown to the Indians before the colonists arrived – and now even taming black flies.

Across early America, honeybees took refuge in three types of shelter, one being the straw skep. The other two were the “bee tree,” which was any tree hollow enough to house a hive, and the third was the “bee gum,” a chunk of hollow log, often from a black or red gum tree, hence its name. Then as now, whenever a hive reached its population threshold, its worker bees created a new queen, who swarmed with a few thousand workers to begin a new colony.

Frequently the departing swarm found a home in a bee tree, thus migrating to a new locale without human help. Other times, an alert beekeeper spotted a hive starting to swarm and employed an old European custom called “tanging,” banging

on pans or ringing a bell to announce that the new swarm of bees was his and for other beekeepers to keep away. American beekeepers were still tanging into the 1850s, and maybe some still do in pockets of Appalachia.

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*Hundreds, no, thousands of bees are flying in and out of the two wooden hives in the Vermont woods. I'd just purchased these bee colonies – my first – and now face my moment of truth. Alone with the hives, I will either overcome my fear and become a beekeeper, or I won't. My hands shake as I lift the lid from the first hive – setting off a flight of angry bees – and squeeze smoke over the wooden frames as my beekeeper's handbook instructed. Nervous sweat trickles into my eyes but I can't wipe it away because of the stiff veil. Enraged bees throw themselves against my veil, jacket and gloves. Eventually the bees settle down and so do I. Before the day ends, I do the unthinkable: Take off my gloves and lift a frame of honeycomb as a hundred bees crawl over my bare skin. The bees spare me, and then and there I become a beekeeper.*

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## More Honey, More Wax

Honey and beeswax were increasingly important commodities in early America, and beekeepers were intent on gathering more and more of each. They took advantage of succulent spring blossoms by loading dozens of hives onto flatboats, floating downstream at night and anchoring by dawn so the bees could gather nearby nectar and pollen. When the flatboat became heavy with honey, the men and their bees returned home. Such practices promoted natural migration of honeybees along America's waterways throughout the 1700s.

Honeybees during that period swarmed west into Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee, and south







into the Carolinas, Georgia, Mississippi and Alabama. By 1771, nearly 30,000 pounds of beeswax were being exported annually from Philadelphia alone. So impressed were Americans with the honeybees' productivity that the term "bee" became common for events that drew people together for shared tasks, such as quilting bees, chopping bees, and husking bees.

Yet, honeybees were not invincible. The stress of colonizing the New World weakened beehives as surely it did human populations. A bacterial disease called American foulbrood killed off untold millions of bee larvae throughout the 1700s. Then, beginning around 1806, the wax moth infiltrated American hives, destroying honeycomb and dealing another serious blow to America's honeybee population.

Not only did bees die, but their caretakers did as well. In some regions, custom dictated that when a beekeeper died, the bees must be told. Folklorist Wayland Hand documented that in Kentucky, for example, the bad news was whispered to the bees, while in New Hampshire it was loudly sung to the hives, usually in verse:

**"Bees, bees, awake!  
Your master is dead,  
And another you must take."**

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*Early spring in Oregon, cherry trees beginning to blossom and the year's first honeyflow is only a week or two away. On a whim I stop by the pasture where I keep my hives and find three of them toppled over, imprints of horseshoes deep in the surrounding mud. I lean close to the broken hives and hear a low humming. My bees are still alive. But my veil, protective clothing, and smoker are miles away at home. I know what I must do and what will happen, but I do it anyway: I lift the heavy wooden pieces of hives from the mud, placing and straightening them on top of one another, rebuilding my bees' homes. The bees panic – just as they must have when the horse kicked over the hives – and they attack. That evening I sit in a chair, dazed by the venom of two-dozen stings. I'm home and safe, with the satisfaction that my bees, too, are again safely in their homes.*

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## Heading West

When Meriwether Lewis and William Clark marched their famed expedition to the banks of the Kansas River in 1804, they found numerous honeybee hives already there. The bees had swarmed from the east on their own, but were stalled at the edge of the Great Plains, an enormous prairie that offered scarce shelter or food.





They would wait thirty years before moving farther west. With the opening of the Oregon Trail, honeybees once again accompanied human migration across America, this time overcoming the enormous obstacles posed by prairies, mountains, deserts, and extreme weather along the 2,000-mile journey. But most settlers who tried to transport hives failed, their honeybees dying of starvation, dysentery or lack of ventilation in the hive.

The Mormons were more successful than most. Founder Joseph Smith had adopted the bee skep as an icon for the faith while in Missouri, and Brigham Young had made it into a coat-of-arms by the time the Mormons brought their first hives to Utah in 1848. To the Mormons,

according to their *Deseret News*, the honeybee represented “the industry, harmony, order, and frugality of the people, and the sweet result of their toil, union, and intelligent cooperation.”

Meanwhile, back in Pennsylvania, a soft-spoken clergyman named Lorenzo Langstroth in the late 1840s revolutionized the removable-frame hive so beekeepers could maintain healthier hives and extract honey without enraging the bees. Then, in 1859, this “father of American beekeeping” overcame obstacles to import the first Italian honeybees – a golden-colored, highly productive breed known for its gentle disposition and which Americans eventually associated with the term “honeybee.” While he eventually succeeded in establishing disease-resistant Italian bees in America, at first it was touch-and-go.

“I have never handled anything in my life with such care,” Langstroth wrote in his diary upon the Italian bees’ first arrival. “I arose very early, fearful that the queen might have been chilled and found that the bees had left her. I took her out of the case with fear and trembling. She was stiff and could hardly move. I warmed her with my breath and returned her to her colony.”

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*Midsummer and my hives are overflowing with sweet honey. I’d purchased a honey extractor second-hand and put it in the old one-horse barn behind our house in the Victorian neighborhood where we lived near Portland, Oregon. I drive my van to the pasture several miles away to remove honey-laden frames from several hives and set them into empty hive boxes for transporting back to the barn. Bees by the hundreds swarm inside the van. I wear my beekeeper’s veil as I drive through city streets. At stoplights, motorists following me suddenly see the bees and back up. At home, as I extract the honey, bees from miles around form a huge, black, funnel-shaped cloud above my barn. Some neighbors are alarmed and telephone my wife, but the bravest of them stop by to watch. Small jars of sweet, amber liquid straight from the hive do wonders to maintain peace in the neighborhood.*

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## By Land and By Sea

Honeybees and the golden honey Americans so savored would finally arrive on the West Coast because of another form of gold – the California Gold Rush of 1848. More than 300,000 people would pour into California, about half traveling overland and half by sea. Undoubtedly a few hives made it to California in wagons, but most of the hives arrived on the West Coast on ships sailing around the horn of South America.

A Pennsylvania beekeeper named Samuel Harbison figured out how to modify wooden Langstroth hives for better ventilation, and then reduced the size of colonies for the long sea voyage. The ship Sonora arrived in San Francisco in 1857 with 67 of Harbison's beehives aboard, their colonies intact.

"If you ever come to Oregon, you must not make any calculations on keeping bees, for they cannot be raised here," Northwest resident Charles Stevens wrote in 1853 to friends in the east. "The winters are not cold enough to keep them in, they come out of the hive to fly about, and a little shower of rain will catch them and in that way the whole swarm will be destroyed." Yet, five years later – due to the stronger Italian breed, the improvements to the wooden hives, and the ability to transport hives over the high seas – there were at least 400 productive hives reported in Oregon.

It took just over 230 years for honeybees to travel – hive, by hive, by hive – from the first European settlements on America's Atlantic coast in 1622 to the new settlements along the Pacific coast in 1853. Over the next century and a half, honeybees would become a major American industry, pollinating crops coast to coast and in 2009 providing 144 million pounds of their delicious sweetener to food manufacturers and family kitchens across the land. Honeybees also would suffer terrible new diseases, with tracheal mites and the mysterious Colony Collapse Disorder drastically reducing their population.

Still, through it all, honeybees have remained an important symbol of industry, thrift, and harmony – helping America become truly a land of milk and honey.

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