

# Bee-keeping on the Prairies

By G. G. GUNN, Lockport, Man.

The question is often asked, by people who have moved into our prairie sections of Western Canada from the supposedly more favored regions of the East and South, where they have been used to the successful pursuit of this industry, "Can bee-keeping be successfully and profitably carried on on the prairies of Western Canada?" Having had over twenty-five years' experience with an apiary in the province of Manitoba, the climatic and other conditions of which are substantially the same as in the two westward provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta, it is my purpose, in the present brief article, to answer this question, so far as I am able. This I shall, naturally, endeavor to do out of my own experience; for, having travelled over a considerable portion of Saskatchewan, and having some knowledge of the general conditions that prevail in Alberta, I am of the opinion that my own experiences could be duplicated in many districts of these Western provinces.

## Wintering in the Cellar

Naturally, in considering a subject of this kind, one of the first thoughts that rush to the mind of the would-be bee-keeper is that of the winter. "What of the winter?" they say. "How could these Western winters, with their extreme length and severity of frost, affect one's chances of making a success of such an enterprise?" In some parts of the East and South, of course, a slight covering right on the summer stands, or a chaff hive, is all that is necessary for winter protection. Now, so far as Southern Alberta is concerned, I am not prepared to say but that, in certain sheltered locations, this method of wintering might prove quite successful. In the major portions of both Saskatchewan and Alberta, I have no hesitation in saying that it would not do at all. Here in Manitoba, I have known of bees being successfully wintered in trenches dug in the garden, roofed over and covered with straw and earth; the general practice, however, is to winter in a cellar, and this method, while involving a certain amount of labor, in putting in and taking out the bees, is found to be most satisfactory. All the requirements for such a wintering quarter is that the cellar should be dry, dark, well ventilated and kept a few degrees above frost. I have always wintered mine in the basement of my house, and I think my experience in wintering has been quite as satisfactory as that of the average bee-keeper in Ontario or the States to the South. I am always careful to keep my cellar well ventilated, so as to be free from damp and mould. This ventilating is done by means of a small pipe leading up into the pipe of one of the heating stoves above. In this way, the draft through the pipe keeps up a constant circulation of air, and so draws all the foul air from the bees.

## Need Plenty of Food

To winter them successfully, it is necessary to prepare the bees for winter during September while the days are warm, so that each hive is seen to have ample food for the long winter months, twenty to thirty pounds, according to the number of bees that are in it. When winter comes, say about the first of November, they should be put in their cellar, and, just as soon as all the snow is gone in the spring, and warm weather is assured, they should be taken out and put on their old stands. On account of the long winter, it is well to get them out of winter quarters just as soon as it seems safe. See that they have some food, and clean away all the mould and dirt that may have gathered in the hive bottoms and on the combs during the winter. If possible, it is better still to transfer them into clean, dry hives. And, last, but not least, see that each hive has a good queen, for on this depends all the success of the season.

For some time after the bees are taken out and placed on their summer stands, it will be necessary to look over



Apiary of G. G. Gunn at Lockport, Man.

them more or less frequently, and to build up any weak hives that may be among them. With us in Manitoba the swarming season commences about the first of June, any swarms coming in May being regarded as especially early. Swarms coming about this time will build up into strong colonies by mid-summer, and will themselves swarm, if allowed, and will often store as much surplus as the parent hive. My experience here with swarming has been that one or more swarms can be counted on for each colony, during the season, and yet the honey production of the apiary be in no way interfered with. It will be found advantageous, however, to curtail swarming to a certain extent if honey production is the object in view. This can be done very easily by swarming artificially, and always keeping well ahead of the increase of the hive with empty frames and bodies. I frequently have my hives, the eight-frame Langstroth being used, built up six storeys high before the end of the season. My aim is always to keep so far ahead of the bees as to have "plenty of room at the top" for further expansion.

## Face Morning Sun

The location of the apiary, here as elsewhere, is of no little importance. I have always had mine located in a

spot well sheltered with trees, having an exposure to the south and east, with the doors of the hives facing the latter quarter. In this way they get the benefit of the early morning sun; and, in the cooler days of the autumn, the same advantage from the south; while, at all seasons, our chilling north winds are prevented from blowing upon them. If the plan of simply setting the hives on small blocks on the ground is followed, which is the one I have always followed myself, it will be necessary to keep all grass and weeds cut away from about them, which might hinder the bees from working, or tend to keep the hives damp during rainy weather.

Of equal importance with that of wintering, to the would-be bee-keeper

of our Western prairie provinces, is the question of "pasture," or supply of honey-producing flowers in the summer. What about the pasturage? Are there sufficient wild flowers on our prairies to make it possible for bees to gather honey sufficient to make it worth while to bother with them? And I must say that this question is generally a discourager to the uninitiated. To the casual observer passing over our Western prairies, there does not appear to be a superabundance of flowers from which to produce honey. This, however, is very largely only in seeming. With the exception of the bare, bunch-grass prairies of certain parts of Manitoba, Alberta and Saskatchewan, where there is no timber or shelter for miles, and where bees could not very well be made a success in any case on account of the high winds that continually sweep over them, there is just as much natural pasture to be found in our Western provinces as in any part of the Dominion. Wild flowers are abundant all over the West, and many of the indigenous species are not to be despised as honey plants.

Moreover, where the natural wild flower is found to be scarce, it is a very simple matter to introduce some of the famous honey plants of the East and South that will quickly grow wild and supply an abundance of pas-



A Successful Bee-yard on the farm of William McClood near Norgate Siding, Man.

ture, if they are just given a chance. All that is necessary is to get a few pounds of seed of the common Sweet Clover (*Mililotus Alba*) and scatter them in any waste corner of the farm, along the roadside, or, especially, along the banks of any stream that may be in your neighborhood, and, in a very short time, there will be plenty of pasture for any number of bees. Another excellent honey plant that rapidly spreads itself, in a similar way, in waste places, is the common White Clover (*Trifolium Repens*), the seed of which may be got for a few cents from any seedsman. These plants, which produce the finest quality of honey, are perfectly hardy throughout the West; and, as I know from my own experience, will if scat-

tered around a little, soon solve the pasture problem in any locality. Only a few years ago, in this district, i.e., the Red River north of Winnipeg, we were entirely dependent upon the wild plants and had none of these; now we have not only acres upon acres of the small white, but an abundance of the Sweet Clover also, growing from six to eight feet in height and producing a crop of the finest honey in the market. These plants, I may say, we were not even under the necessity of sowing; they came to us like any other wild weed; and now I would be quite justified in labelling my honey "Pure White Clover." What has taken place here, I am confident can be repeated in many other parts of the West.

## Quality Excellent

I am often asked by people from the Eastern provinces as to the quality of the honey we produce in this Western country; and, in view of what I have just said, my answer can easily be guessed. In color the honey produced in my apiary can compare favorably with the best Eastern product; and in quality—well, of course, White Clover is White Clover all the world over. In all my twenty-five years as a bee-keeper, I have not had ten customers who did not like my honey; and, on the other hand, I have some customers that I have supplied for over twenty years. To some who have moved to British Columbia I ship regularly each season. The bulk of my honey I dispose of to the leading grocer in Winnipeg; and, as a further commentary on quality, I may say that the only difficulty I have with him is that I cannot give him enough.

This brings us to the question of a market, which is really sufficiently answered in the last few remarks just made. In this Western country, where we have to import all these luxuries, there is no trouble to dispose of all the honey we can produce, and at a good price. And what is true of the Winnipeg district, I have no doubt, will be found true of the rest of Western Canada. The difficulty is not to dispose of the product but to supply the demand.

## Money in Bees

To a certain extent, the success of an enterprise is measured by the amount of money that can be made out of it; and, although some people go into bee-keeping simply for the novelty and pleasure, the majority of us go into it for the amount of hard cash we can make out of the business. Of course, we all, entirely irrespective of dividends, derive a certain amount of pleasure from studying the ways of this most wonderful insect; and, I may add, that it is only those who do, who can hope in the end to make a success of it financially, either here in the West or anywhere else. But I would give it as my opinion that, judging from my own experience, there is no reason why any person living in any of our Western provinces, where it is sufficiently sheltered, should not be able to keep bees and make good money out of them.

With regard to this question of the profitability or non-profitability of bee-keeping in the West, I may, in closing, be pardoned in taking another leaf from the book of my experience. The question is often asked by would-be bee-keepers: "What yield should we get from each hive during the season?"—a rather hard question to answer in a general way, as it all depends on the season. Bee-keeping is just like any other agricultural calling that is dependent on the weather. Some years, when all the elements are favorable, the yield is good; others, when the weather is adverse, it shares the fate of other crops. What I count a fair average return from each hive (spring count), in my own apiary, is one swarm of new bees and one hundred pounds of extracted honey. If the spring is extra early, and bees rather than honey is the aim, one may get two swarms from

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