

Chapter 1

An Apiary of Thousands

Looking through the veil of my white protective suit, I tried to make sure I had all the tools I needed for the assault. It was a little hard to see some things, because sweat was running down my forehead, and the salty moisture was flooding and stinging my eyes. The ambient temperature was 92 degrees F, but my skin temperature must have been about 102 degrees. Humidity was high, especially inside my protective armor. But I wouldn't take off my suit. I couldn't. It would be too dangerous. It could even mean the difference between life and death for me.

Slowly my partner and I moved toward our target. We could see them now, and we realized that some of them could probably see us, too. Was that a guard moving in our direction? Sure, it must be. And she would alert the rest of the guards. We'd have to be careful.

As I got closer, I could hear them. Sounded like they were engaged in angry conversation to me. The heat was probably bothering them, too. And if they knew what we were up to (which they might have figured out by now, thanks to that guard reporting us), we were in for trouble.

When I got within about thirty yards, I dropped to my knees, and set the canister on the ground. Putting a putrid

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mixture into the chamber, I dropped a match in. A sickening, green-brown smoke started to rise from the chamber. I coughed, trying to clear the horrible gasses from my lungs. I would have to be more careful. This was no time for me to get sick. I looked at my partner. Was she smiling for some reason? Perhaps it was just concern.

Using the well-engineered simple bellows mechanism, I engaged the canister and watched the results. Thick smoke poured from its end along with a little flame. That should take care of the troublemakers, I thought.

With thickly gloved hands I expertly disconnected the series of electric wires guarding the palace. Getting shocked was the least of my concerns right now. It was time. I looked at my partner and nodded. She nodded back. I noticed beads of perspiration on her forehead that hadn't been there a few minutes before. The strain was getting to her as well. I was afraid of that. One of us had to keep our head and not get afraid. They could sense fear, I was sure.

I reached into my side pocket and removed a red prying tool. We had to break into the palace. We were looking for a queen. If we found her, we knew our task: destroy her.

As soon as I broke into the palace, an angry mob suddenly attacked me. They were all over me, near my face, on my arms, my legs, my feet, my stomach. There were hundreds of them, maybe thousands. Our intelligence had suggested there could be 60,000 potential combatants inside. I suddenly felt very small and weak. How could we win such a battle?

I looked to my partner for strength. She was being attacked also. We knew what we had to do. Taking the smoking chamber, I sprayed the putrid, acrid smoke all over my attackers. Some flames leaped out, putting an end to some lives. I didn't mean to kill them, just restrain them. But what happened, happened.

Using my tool, I continued dismantling the palace, revealing more angry combatants. Soon the air was full of

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swirling, buzzing hordes who would have liked nothing better than to see me gone. It was them or me.

I removed the last of the covers that prevented me looking for the queen, and made a quick inspection. No queen! I looked at my partner to verify. “There isn’t one,” she said, swinging off an attack from a pesky combatant at the same time.

Quickly I started reassembling the palace. The angry attacks didn’t stop. Our job was done. But we would be back. We had to come back once a week at least. We had to keep looking for a queen. A queen who would fly away and take all of her loyal combatants with her.

The sweat poured off my face as I walked away from the scene. We were though. And we hadn’t taken any casualties on our end.

Such was the scene played out many times during the summer, as we searched through hive bodies, doing a “swarm check,” trying to see if there were swarm cells or a new queen bee developing in the bee hives. If there was one, we had to remove her before she could hatch, fly, and take the bees in the hives with her. This was a hard, hot job. A thankless job, in many ways. So, how did we ever get into this mess? Why did we decide to become beekeepers? Were we drawn by the unique solitude one feels when he is alone with 120,000 bees on a summer afternoon? No! But there were several reasons for keeping bees. One of our sons, Ben, has asthma. We had read that locally-grown honey was supposed to really help, especially if part of his allergies were to plants and trees in our area. So, we went looking for some local honey. The closest we could find was from a beekeeper in Maple, which is about ten or twelve miles away. Sorry, but that was considered too far away for our tastes. It might be true everywhere, but living so close to Lake Superior, we have some quite varied microclimates. We felt that to take care of Ben’s allergies, we needed a very local source.

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There was another reason we wanted to keep bees. Susie had read in several places that getting stung by honey bees might actually help prevent complications later in life from arthritis. Since it was looking like both Susie and Jeannie might be susceptible to that, and because Jeannie was already showing signs of joint problems, we thought that having bees and letting her work with them might actually help her out in the long run. More about that later.

As you've probably learned by reading books on farming, farming supplies cost money. So in February of 1995, I pulled out my checkbook once again to get all set up for bee keeping. I bought boxes and boxes of unassembled hive bodies (that is what bees live in and store the honey in) and frames (little separators inside the hive bodies) and spent countless hours in the dead of winter putting them together in our unheated workshop.

I had to put every single thing together. When I have to buy honey now, I realize that we are getting a real deal! The hives along with the first batch of tools (bee suits, hats, gloves, cute little soft bee brushes, hive tools for separating the hives, etc.) cost me \$427. I also bought many sheets of foundation (these are what the bees make honeycombs on) for \$85. And the foundation must be connected to the hive somehow, thus the cost of support pins – \$36.

By April I had all the hive bodies put together and painted. We painted them a dull grey, instead of white like you're probably used to seeing, because it is so cold up here in early summer. A slightly darker wood color would absorb more heat than white, and give the bees a better start in the cold months of May and early June. At least that is what we thought.

I took our perfectly constructed hives out to the bee site, but I needed a way to keep them well off the ground. You see, skunks will walk up to a bee hive, bang on the hive, and then eat the bees as they fly out to see what's going on. So I decided to place the bee hives up on raised stands, and then I

bought some concrete blocks to go on top of the hive bodies. This was to help secure the hives, and to make sure a wind storm wasn't going to blow the top away. The concrete blocks only cost me \$17, by far the least expensive part of the bee enterprise to date.

We had read that ants will try to climb up into the hives and steal honey. Not good! I put the legs of the stands into empty cans filled with water, with a small amount of motor oil on top. From what we read, that was supposed to keep the ants from being able to climb up the stand and into the hives. And it worked. Only problem was that many bees (dozens of bees!) ended up drowning in the water and oil mixture. We're not sure why, but they did. Perhaps they just wanted a drink of good cool water, and the oil somehow weighed them down.

You would be surprised at all the animals that would like to get their hands on the honey my bees were going to make! Actually, the animals I was most concerned about were bears. We have quite a few black bears in our area, and we have had several encounters with bears on our farm over the years. We've come upon them while walking the paths through our woods and fields, as well as seeing their footprints in the snow near the house. (Once we even saw a mother bear with her three cubs at the edge of our field, next to the path we walk daily.) Bears are a problem because they not only steal the honey, but totally wreck the hives in the process. So we needed to keep out those 400 pound bears. How? We studied the issue carefully and found the only effective answer: electric fence.

We already had horses, and had an electric fence up for them, so it was an easy matter to simply hook into that fence for our hives. But I don't do things halfway. I didn't just put up one or two stands of fence. No sir, I put up five strands of electric fence around the perimeter of our hive area, each strand about 8 inches above the one below it. When I stood back to look at my handiwork, I was convinced that the electric would

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work, but was less than happy with the way the fence looked – saggy. Later I realized that the problem was caused by using flimsy little electric fence posts instead of strong t-posts, which is what I would have done today.

The electric fence needed one more thing – bacon. You see, if bears brush up against electric fence with their thick shaggy coats, it doesn't hurt them at all. So the electric fence I had just installed would have appeared as little more than a nuisance to our bears. We had to train the bears to respect that fence, and the way to do that is with bacon. No, I didn't come up with this, we read it in several books. Setting up the fence that way is more humane than to have bears tear things up and then be trapped, or perhaps shot by the state as nuisance bears.

Here's how it's supposed to work: bears come up to the wires around the hive and find the bacon. "Hey, look at that free lunch!" they think. Reaching out with their tongue to get the bacon, they get shocked in the mouth, which they can feel. That teaches them to keep away from the bee hives. So, off I went to our favorite grocery store in town, intent on buying some bacon. There I stood in the meat section, inspecting the bacon choices. Cheap bacon, that was what I was after.

The manager of the section (I suppose he is called a butcher) saw me spending a lot of time in the bacon area and walked over to help. "Sir, this Armor® brand bacon is on sale for 60 cents off this week," he offered helpfully. I just mumbled something like, "Thanks," and kept looking at the packages and the prices. "I think I have some more in the back, if you don't like the cuts we have on display," he offered again, helpfully.

It finally dawned on me that he was trying to help me and wasn't going away until I cleared things up. I quickly answered, "No thanks, I'm just looking for the absolutely cheapest bacon I can find." I'm sure that made me sound kind of cheap, and I could see him picturing me as some mean dad who made his children eat lousy cuts of bacon that were mostly

fat. To set the record straight, I continued, “I mean, I just need it for the bears.” His eyebrows went up a little. “It’s to put on our electric fences so the bears will get shocked.”

Clearly, he hadn’t read all those books I had, and walked away, probably disgusted with this customer. I quickly chose the cheapest cuts and brought them home.

I should note for the record that in all the years of our beekeeping, I never saw a single piece of bacon gone off our electric fence. And I never heard a bear bellow out in anger, as if to say “Hey, who electrified the bacon!” But it was there, and we had done our best. (The bacon would, however, sometimes fry itself in the intense summer heat.)

The fencing around the hives created some hassles. In the summertime, I would have to cut the grass around the hives, keeping down an easy access for ants. This wasn’t hard the first time, but became more so as the summer progressed. Have you ever put on a bee suit and cut grass with a push mower around thousands of bees, none of which are happy about all that noise? The guard bees were very much on duty during this time, making me wish I was somewhere else.

And I don’t know why, but we would never cut off the electric fence when we would go into the bee compound. No, sir. To enter, we would have to unhook and drop all five electric fence handles on the ground, go inside, and re-hook all five handles. Now we were sort of trapped inside the bee compound ourselves. To get back out, we would have to drop all five handles again, re-hooking them one at a time. Why didn’t we kill the electric? Were we afraid a bear would come along while we were in there? I don’t have a clue.

Briefly, let me give you a rundown of what a typical “palace” or bee hive looks like. A bottom board sits on the stand with an entrance reducer on the front. The reducer can be adjusted as the summer progresses, making it larger when the hive gets more bees. The reducer makes it easier for the bees to defend their hive. You see, there are marauding bees who

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would like to enter and steal all the honey – the home hive can only defend a large opening if they have lots of bees, and in the spring the population in the hive is at its lowest. On top of the bottom board sits the brood hive body, where the queen and her drones live. Next comes a screen, called an excluder. The slats are large enough to allow regular worker bees to enter, but not the queen or her drones (I guess the workers don't want that upper crust coming in to make comments.) Then come hive bodies, the place where bees store honey for us – large ones are called “supers” while smaller ones are called “half-supers” or “regular bodies.” This is all topped off with an inner cover and a metal-clad cover. As the summer progresses, the beekeeper keeps adding more supers as needed.

Okay, so now we needed bees. Susie located a beekeeper about thirty minutes away from us that might be willing to sell us some bees. Once on our way to spend an afternoon at a nearby state park, we stopped by his farm and talked with him. He enthusiastically gave us lots of pointers about bees, and told us many facts of which we were unaware. As we spoke with him, we mentioned that we were looking forward to getting the propolis almost as much as the honey. Propolis is the glue-like substance the bees hold their hives together with, and it has great nutritional and healing attributes, including the fact that it is a natural antibiotic. Bob happened to have some propolis on hand and handed a big hunk to us. “Have some,” he encouraged. “You can chew it just like chewing gum. And it's good for you!” Susie was so excited to actually see propolis that she handed it out to the children as soon as she got back to the car.

Ben, in the back seat, thought it looked awful. But Susie convinced him that it was a pure, natural, wonderful product. “You can even eat it like chewing gum,” she enthused, passing out the “gum.” Our children weren't allowed to chew gum, so this was pretty tempting. Soon everyone was busily smacking on the hard dark brown propolis. The children, however, did

NOT think it the treat chewing gum would have been . . . not their favorite flavor. When we got to the state park, Susie put a big blob of it on the floorboard. It turned out to be one of the few really hot days we have in summer here. The windows in the car were rolled up, and it got very, very hot in there. The propolis baked into the carpet, where it became a brown blob of cement. Nothing would take it out! When the car died, many years later, that blob of propolis was still there.

Sad to say, the propolis did pretty much the same thing to all of our teeth also, sort of chemically bonding to them. Our tongues got exhausted trying to push, shove, drag, or wear down the propolis stuck all over our teeth. Stephen says we all looked like we had “Billy Bob” teeth (if you don’t what that means, congratulations!). After the state park, we went out to eat, where we continued to work on the propolis. Jeannie remembers going into the bathroom and finding Susie, with her mouth gaped open, looking in the mirror, and scraping vigorously with her finger nails. “It won’t come off,” she mumbled. Oh well, it did eventually wear off, and we learned our lesson. We still take propolis for medicine (it really works – even AIDS researchers are investigating it), but we try and make sure it doesn’t get on our teeth.

On May 13, Susie and Jeannie drove our van about thirty minutes away and came home with two colonies of bees from a different local bee keeper. (Not Bob, but it wasn’t because we were mad. Really.) That cost us \$60. Now just keep in mind that there were approximately 20,000 bees back there in the back seat, just held inside their hive parts with a few pieces of duct tape. Want to come along for the ride? I didn’t, so I stayed home and prayed for their safety. The bees were brought home and put into our new hive bodies. We were officially bee keepers! But there wasn’t anything for them to do yet. The dandelions weren’t ready, and neither was the clover. So, we had to mix them a batch of water, vinegar, and honey, and feed the bees via quart jars. The jars

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were attached to lids that just fit into the reducer opening of the hives.

I'll never forget when the first blossoms of dandelion came out that summer. I was taking a walk with Susie, like we do every day. Stooping down, I picked a bloom. Susie, in a controlled, even voice said, "Steve, the bees need that." I admit I was surprised. Was she talking about the single bloom I was holding in my hand? "Do you mean this?" I asked, smiling. Surely she was joking. "Yes," she replied, not returning the smile. She was all seriousness. "I think we need to leave the dandelion and clover for the bees. They need it." I looked across the thirty-five acre hayfield and the thirty-acre pasture. These fields were full of dandelion and clover. But most of it wasn't open yet. There were, here and there, a few other blooms opening up. When I tried to explain that we had plenty, she simply reminded me that we didn't have much yet, and the bees needed it. I wasn't sure what I should do with this single bloom I had picked. No way to reattach it to the plant. To this day, we still disagree (but don't argue) over whether I should have picked that bloom or not. I think she was trying to "mother" the bees, and she felt sorry for them because they didn't have many nice blooms to work with. But to set the record straight, let me announce: I did stop picking dandelion and clover blossoms.

Bees do what they are supposed to do. You've heard the old saying "busy as a bee." Yep, they sure are busy. They fly out many times a day, bringing nectar and pollen back to the hive. This is converted into honey by a process that I will greatly simplify here: the forager bees fill themselves with 85 percent of their body weight of nectar, then bring the nectar back to house bees who chew it for half an hour or so. This is then stored in an empty cell. (The bees add enzymes to the nectar as they chew, which is just one of many reasons raw honey is so good for you.) The bees actually dry the honey (making it thicker), by fanning their wings over it. Later,

workers will seal up those honeycombs, and you have something called “sealed honey.” That’s good. That’s exactly what you want. And that’s what our bees started doing for us. This was easy!

Well, the bees worked so hard that we had to add more hive bodies and more frames. If you think of a bee hive as sort of like an apartment building with many floors, all that means is that we added more stories or floors onto the top of their apartment building. We had started out with a two story, and now were up to three stories.

What if the little bees were to get too prolific and we were to run out of room? The “Be Prepared” Boy Scout in me thought we’d better buy more hive bodies and foundations. So in June, that’s what we did – at a cost of \$85. Along the way, we had to buy additional items like various sized bee escapes – cost of \$3.

Okay, if you’re like me and don’t know much about bees, you probably think that beekeeping consists of putting up some hives, getting bees to live in there somehow, and then stealing the honey at the end of summer. Right? Wrong. You’re in those hives all summer long, checking for queens, adding supers (more floors on the “apartment building”), and making sure everything is okay. And it’s hard to break into their hives. They use propolis and create something that is about as strong as concrete to glue everything together. So, how does one “mess with the bees” safely? Well, wouldn’t it be nice if the bees, rather than being angry at you for messing with their hives, were calm, relaxed, and nonaggressive? That’s the purpose of smoke.

Smoke pacifies bees (or so we were told) by making them think there might be a fire. The bees rush to the hives and start gorging on honey (why let it all burn up!?), making them so fat they can’t sting as easily. Also, the smoke masks the chemical alarm given off when one bee stings you, so that others don’t come and help out by stinging as well.

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Of course you can just set the grass on fire near the hive to accomplish that, but they make a nifty little tool called a smoker, which is much safer and more convenient. We bought the top-of-the-line model. And at least in theory, they are easier to operate. All you do is put some combustible material (not specified) into the burn chamber, light it, and squeeze the bellows a few times, causing the smoke to come out the little spout. What to use for combustible material? Someone suggested hay. So I went to the barn, found some old, rotten, musty hay, put it in the chamber, and dropped a match down into it. The match went out. I tried it again. And again . . . the match always went out. “Try giving it some air,” Stephen suggested. So I squeezed the bellows while the match was in there. Finally it started up.

I have never used drugs in my life. But when I was a child, the police came to one of our Vacation Bible Schools and lit some marijuana in the sanctuary, so all us kids would know what it smelled like. Awful stuff. Well, that’s what my smoker smelled like. It made me sick every time the wind would blow it back into my face. So we switched to another fuel: old newspaper. It lit much easier, but then when I was using the bellows, instead of just smoke coming out of the puffer, balls of flame would leap out. I had turned the smoker into a miniature flame thrower!

Now, I don’t know what the story is about our bees, but the smoke from our smoker didn’t really seem to take their minds off the fact that a man in a bee suit was tearing up their hives. So, after a while, we just quit using the smoker. I’m sure I was doing something wrong, but never could figure out what it was.

Another tool we used a lot was called a bee brush. No, it’s not to comb their cute little hairy legs. It’s designed to “carefully and gently remove a bee from your bee suit.” You see, some bees don’t want to go away. They seem intent on staying on your bee suit and perhaps finding a way to end their

life, but make your life miserable in the process – that’s calling stinging you, in case you haven’t figured it out. We always had our little bee brushes with us. But I admit that after a while, when the bees wouldn’t respond to the “gentle” reminder to “move along now, buddy,” that I would help them along with my rough leather glove. After all, enough is enough.

This chapter began with Susie and me looking for swarm cells and queen bees. A hive is supposed to have one and only one queen. If another is hatched, she will fly away with some of the bees and make a new hive. Just a week after I had checked for a queen, one hive swarmed. Susie asked, “Who didn’t find the queen!?” It was me, of course. We found the queen with her swarm (made of thousands of bees) up in the limb of a tree not far away. Now what do we do? We cut the limb off to carry it back to the hives. But we dropped it (I can’t imagine why anyone would be nervous under that circumstance, but there you have it!) and the bees poured off. We scooped up what we could and put them back in the hive. Next morning they all swarmed again and we weren’t able to get them that time. That’s a fact of life when you are keeping bees.

Summer finally came to an end that year. You know, the time of year where you enjoy the changing leaves, watch the birds fly south, and basically relax. Not if you have bees. Now it’s time to steal their honey. This is actually more complex than you might imagine, at least for the Castleberrys. As I’ve mentioned, the smokers weren’t helping us at all. So we basically had to go in there – without being able to divert their attention – and steal all their hard work away from them. Naturally, they weren’t thrilled about that. But what could they do? Well, they could attach themselves to the hives and the supers and the combs and our bee suits. We had a terrible time trying to separate the bees from the honey.

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So we came up with a plan. We would carefully remove as many bees as we could from a super full of honey, and move that super about thirty feet away. We continued doing this until most of the supers were located away from the hives. Then we repeated the process, moving the supers thirty feet further away yet again. We kept doing this, slowly making our way toward the house with the honey-filled supers. At each stop, we'd remove any stubborn bees that were still hanging on. By the time we got to the basement with the supers, most, but not all, of the bees were off.

But bees would still be clinging to our bee suits. We'd brush them off, or go and stand in a strong wind, if possible, to get them off our suits. And let me tell you one more thing about our suits. Our suits were made of nylon. Which is supposed to be great, because bees can't sting through the nylon, like they can through canvas suits. However, here's the tradeoff: with the canvas suits, you could zip the veil up completely so no bees could get inside your veil. Not so with the nylon ones. As a result, on many trips to our hives, we would be looking eye to eye with one or more bees that were inside our veils, sometimes landing on our faces. That doesn't breed confidence or joy, let me tell you! Can't you picture it? Several bees are crawling across your face and there's not a thing you can do about it. You can't run, because they're inside a veil with you, so that wouldn't help. And you can't take off your veil and let them fly away, because you're surrounded by thousands of bees at the time. Not fun!

To extract honey, you have to cut open the comb and then let the honey flow out. We took a long sharp kitchen knife and started opening the comb. It wasn't a neat job and we got wax all mixed in with the honey. Then we let the combs drip. It took a long time and when we were through, there was still some honey left in the combs that couldn't come out because we hadn't uncapped the comb very evenly. And we wanted that honey! You know, it's kind of like the toothpaste in the

bottom of the tube. Everyone wants to get it out (primarily because everyone is too lazy to go to the basement and grab a new tube of toothpaste), but after a certain point, it's just not worth the effort.

Next the honey was put into quart jars. As long as the honey doesn't get wet, it will store for many years that way. That first year we extracted about seventy-five pounds of rich, golden honey, which filled about twenty-five quart jars. We were ecstatic! We have a great picture of Elijah at nearly two years old, standing next to the hive supers in the kitchen, finger full of honey, helping himself to the rewards of beekeeping. Of course, we left a lot of the honey in the hives, so that the bees could live on it over the winter.

Early that winter, on one of the first snowy days, Susie and I were taking our walk. As we neared the bee hives, we saw the children gleefully running around and stomping something under their boots. As they did this, they would sing out, "That's eleven for me! Twelve! Thirteen! . . ." You guessed it, they were stomping and killing bees that had come out of the hive for some reason and had landed on the snow. We told the children to stop killing our honey bees and investigated. We didn't know the reason, but it didn't look like they were going to make it through the winter after all.

And they didn't make it. So, in June of 1996, we bought two packages of bees (\$60) and had them shipped by U.S. mail. Our postmaster called us early in the morning when they arrived at our post office, imploring us to come soon and pick up our bees. And I couldn't blame her — there were about 20,000 bees in the back room of her office!

Learning from our experiences of the year before, we decided to set up another hive, so we had to buy more concrete blocks and hive sets. In July, hoping for a bumper crop of honey, we paid \$110 for an extractor and uncapping knife. The extractor is designed to use centrifugal force in order to get the last of the honey out of the combs (like getting the last of the

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toothpaste out of the tube). We were set for big production now. But the weather didn't cooperate. The total honey extracted that summer was only six pounds (two quart jars for all our efforts!), due to the rainy, cold weather.

Needless to say, our bees didn't winter over, and we had to get all new bees again the next summer. For our investment of \$60 for two packages of bees in 1997, we extracted 156 pounds (52 quart jars full) of honey. Now we were doing well. We had worked out the bugs and could see that having bees made sense. We even made cut comb honey that year (with the waxy comb included) which was a treat for everyone.

Having animals and doing things on the farm makes for some interesting conversations and games. Once we were in Chattanooga, visiting my mom. The children were playing a guessing game, where someone lists components of an item and everyone tries to figure out what the object is. Stephen had given clues of concrete, wood, metal, and wax. The correct answer was "bee hives." Instead, six-year-old Ben blurted out, "Shorts!" That caused everyone to erupt in laughter. As it turns out, Ben wasn't even listening to the clues, he was too busy thinking about how hot he was and wishing he could change from his jeans into shorts.

There were drawbacks to having bees, of course. For one thing, our younger children were always getting stung, even when they stayed away from the hives. You see, bees go all over the place collecting nectar, including places like our children's play yard and the front yard. The children were always stepping on bees, because we had so much clover in all those places. Once, eight-year-old Katie stepped on a bee and started laughing very loudly, saying, "I stepped on a bee! Ha! Ha! I stepped on a bee! Ha! Ha!" She had seen others get stung and cry, but for some reason it didn't hurt her when she first stepped on the bee. That's why she was laughing – she thought it was funny that getting stung didn't hurt after all. Then she started crying wildly once the pain finally kicked in.

We reminded the children to wear shoes and socks while they were in the yard, but it was a hard new habit to start. So they tried wearing flip flops instead, but would sometimes flip them off when swinging, neglecting to put them back on when it was time to come inside. Then Stephen would run over the flops with the lawnmower while cutting the grass, spraying pieces of foam in all directions.

When the children would get stung, I would take them into the house and try to take their minds off the pain, by telling them funny things, and showing them items in catalogs. That was nice, but it didn't really take the pain away. Neither did my mom's remedy of baking soda and water. Of course the first thing was to get the stinger out, after which applying a charcoal poultice was good. There is a product that really works called Sting Stop®, which is natural and fantastic and we highly recommend it.

We should have had some Sting Stop® on hand when a friend of ours, David Grapentine, came over to give us some tips on beekeeping. David and Rachel Grapentine are very gracious and giving people who seem to know just about everything there is to know about self-sufficient living. David was standing near the hives, talking to us, when a few of the bees seemed to get unhappy that we were so close. As more and more bees gave us some warning barnstorming dives, most of the Castleberrys got a bit anxious, and moved a little further away. But David remained perfectly calm about it all, even when a bee flew up his nose and stung him, inside his nose! The children watched in silent amazement as he waved off our worried questions about what we could do for him to relieve the pain. They were even more amazed when his nose continued to swell, growing quite red in the process. Never a complaint from David, however. Now that's a true beekeeper!

The biggest downside about having bees was a problem Jeannie had. Remember, one of the reasons we got bees was so that Jeannie could benefit from the occasional bee sting. Well,

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as it turns out, Jeannie is highly allergic to bee stings. Bee stings have a small amount of nerve poison, a poison that is very similar to cobra venom. While 99.98% of people are not allergic to this and other compounds in a bee sting, Jeannie is *very* allergic. She was helping take some supers off when she got her first bee sting. A bee got inside her suit and stung her on the face, near her mouth. She began crying from the pain, it hurt so badly. Susie was working with her at the time, and didn't understand the tears. You see, Susie hardly even feels it when she gets stung. Jeannie said the sting felt like a match or branding iron had touched her face. Susie got Jeannie back to the house, but her face was already swelling quickly.

As soon as I saw her, I knew something bad had happened. The swelling quickly dropped down to her neck. Jeannie looked like she didn't have a neck, her face just went straight down to her collarbone. The next morning she told us that during the night she had trouble swallowing, and that her throat was closing up. We should have gone to the emergency room the night before, but I took her to the doctor that morning, who gave her a shot of antihistamine plus a prescription for some pills. It took weeks for the swelling to go down. She's not been stung since then. But she always carries her epi pen with her (a shot that will help save

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her life if she gets stung again). If you have a child who starts swelling badly with a bee sting, don't wait!

Betsy and Susie would still like to do bees again some day. But it's not going to be possible until Jeannie is far, far away from any bees on our farm!