

The Bee Whisperer

A childhood fascination with bees led to a livelihood and a way of life for Wisconsin native Mary Celley.

BY JOHN PEDERSON

An annual ritual: Mary Celley picking up nearly a half-million bees shipped from California.

Photos by John Pederson

AFTER A CUP OF COFFEE sweetened with a spoonful of crystallized honey, Mary Celley emerges from her log home near Brooklyn wearing a faded red baseball cap, blue jeans, a tattered brown jacket, small golden specs, and a playful grin. Two eager friends follow close behind her. Sparks, a rambunctious young black lab, seems almost as excited as Celley. But even old Winnie, Sparks' nine-year-old mother, has an extra bounce in her step today. It's time to get to work on the Celley Farm and help is on the way.

"It's going to be a good day," Celley announces as she buzzes down the steps on her way to pick up the shipment of 400,000 bees that will sustain her honey crop this season.

Celley runs a business called "The Bee Charmer"—yet beekeeping is more than a business for this Wisconsin native. Celley depends on the honey harvest to fulfill her spiritual and social

as well as her monetary needs. She fell under the bee's spell when she was just four years old. While her siblings feared them as unwelcome picnic guests, she was enchanted by these buzzing beauties. Her fascination with bees eventually developed into an entomology degree from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and a part-time job at the campus bee lab. Today Celley is a

bees

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full-time beekeeper with more than 100 hives.

“I feel like I’m doing what I was put here to do,” she says.

Celley is not the only Wisconsinite stung by affection for the honeybee. According to Annette Phibbs, head of the apiary program for the state Department of Agriculture, Wisconsin’s honey industry includes thousands of hobby beekeepers in addition to 50 or so commercial operations.

However, the growing problem of mites and the increasing use of pesticides threaten what has become a waning industry. Celley estimates she lost almost 90 percent of her colony to predators such as the verroa mite last winter.

According to Phibbs, the verroa mite is now resistant to what had been the beekeeper’s most reliable defenses,

Apistan and Checkmite. New treatments cost considerably more than these traditional pesticides, forcing many keepers to hang up their head nets, says Phibbs.

These threats also increase local keepers’ reliance on out-of-state bee suppliers to keep the industry and art of beekeeping alive in Wisconsin. Wayne Harrison is one of the state’s main providers. He usually does not sleep during the 36-hour trip to Wisconsin from his farm in Los Banos, California. For some reason he just can’t relax with 112 million bees following his truck. It is not until his \$500,000 shipment of buzzing cargo is safely unloaded at Dadant and Sons Inc., a bee supply store in Watertown, that Harrison breathes easy. With a look of exhausted satisfaction, he unwraps a Swisher Sweet cigar, knowing he did his part to sustain

Wisconsin’s honey industry for one more year.

When Celley arrives at Dadant and Sons Inc. at 8 a.m., Harrison is already enjoying the last drag of his Swisher Sweet while his crew unloads the last of the bee boxes, each containing roughly 8,000 female worker bees. Queens come packaged separately in private matchbox-sized containers.

“The queen is the hive,” Celley explains, holding the box in her palm. “The colony grooms her and feeds her the royal jelly.” Royal jelly, which is secreted from the salivary glands of worker bees, serves as food for all young larvae during the first few days of life, but remains the only food for larvae that will develop into queen bees. Royal jelly maintains the growth and reproductive capabilities that distinguish the queen bee from the other females in the hive.

After double-checking her order, Celley joins the other keepers inspecting this year’s shipment and sharing stories of ruthless mites and empty hives.

The annual pickup has become a ritual among most Wisconsin beekeepers needing to replenish their colonies from the ravages of winter and the verroa mites. But Wisconsin beekeepers have not always depended on outside help.

According to *The History of Wisconsin’s Beekeeping and Honey Production Industry*, a pamphlet published by the Wisconsin Historical Society, Wisconsin’s first settlers found abundant supplies of honey in the wild. According to the pamphlet, “Hunting ‘bee trees’ and removing honey was a well established practice.” Settlers began documenting the locations of these trees, and by 1967, *Transactions*, a journal of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, had published a collection of known “bee trees” across the state. Today, honey hunting requires less work and more money. Keepers find more than 112 million bees for hire under one roof at Dadant and Sons Inc. at a cost of \$48 per box.



Boxes and boxes of bees from Wayne Harrison’s truck.

Celley cuts a check for \$4,700 and loads 100 boxes of California bees in the back of a covered truck especially arranged for this unseasonably cold April morning. Less experienced keepers risk exposing their cargo to freezing winds on flatbed trucks.

But Celley takes no chances. Much of her income, as well as her personal relationships, depends on these shipments.

You can find Celley at the Dane County Farmers Market every week selling her honey for \$3 to \$7 a bottle. Many of her customers enjoy the light clover variety, but Celley prefers the rich taste of her black locust honey, which she refers to as the “champagne of honey.” The Farmers Market also provides the chance to check in with fellow farmers, longtime customers, and friends. It’s easy to see why the annual delivery is a significant, almost sacred, affair.

On her way back from Dadant and Sons Inc., Celley receives a call on her cell phone.

“Is this the bee charmer?” says the voice on other line.

“Sure is,” she replies.

Celley is on call 24 hours a day for her “bee control” business, managing unwanted bees, hornets, and other stinging insects for area residents. She chose the name because, according to Celley, “Most people think anything that stings is a bee.”

She doesn’t particularly enjoy exterminating unwanted bees, hornets, and wasps, but it provides a second income and gives her a chance to educate people about the differences between stinging insects.

“Honeybees get a bad rap from more aggressive hornets,” Celley explains.

A few minutes after receiving the call, she arrives back at the farm with \$4,700 worth of bees in tow. From her porch you can see small white boxes scattered against the backdrop of an overgrown apple orchard. The hives look somewhat out of place nestled in the tall grass, like ancient monuments waiting to be discovered. A huge burr oak towers over the empty boxes, a lonely old landlord silently looking forward to some company.



Mary Celley, the Bee Charmer, selling her wares at the Dane County Farmers Market.

A fortune teller once told Celley that this particular oak possesses supernatural energy and that it is home to Pan, the Greek god of woods, fields, and flocks. Celley was so impressed by the mystic’s perfect physical description of a tree she had never seen that she looked up Pan in the dictionary upon returning home. She discovered that Pan also is the protector of honey, and moved her hives underneath the old burr oak’s sprawling branches to take advantage of the deity’s watchful presence, which she says she often feels while harvesting honey and checking her hives.

Celley is in her element under the burr oak’s branches. She spends the remaining eight hours of daylight in the tall grass, resettling bees into their new homes.

“These bees will literally work themselves to death in a few weeks,” she says while pouring 7,000 buzzing honeybees into a hive. She might do the same if she had more bees to take care of.

But Celley says the work is therapeutic, and it’s easy to see why. The California honey bees flow out of the box like an oozing stream of honey, their buzz sounding more like a purr on this cool morning.

“This is my sanctuary,” she explains through her beekeeper’s veil.

This form of relaxation includes an acupuncture treatment of sorts. Celley receives 10 stings throughout the day. She announces each one in a calm and affirming tone. “There’s one,” she says without wincing or breaking stride.

On a warmer day she would spray the cages with sugar water to subdue the rambunctious bees after their long journey. Today, however, the shock of a 40-degree April morning is enough to tame this West Coast crowd.

Although spiritually fulfilling, the work still takes a toll on the 50-year-old bee charmer. By the time Celley goes to bed, she can barely move. But you won’t hear her complain. With a weary smile she gently pours the last box of bees into their new home and whispers, “I told you it would be a good day.” Z

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