

Bringing
home the

honey



Clayton Cook



"My grandfather was an avid beekeeper in northern Wisconsin where I grew up," Clayton Cook said. "I can still remember the scent of his honey house, a mixture of honey and beeswax."

Beekeeping always stuck in his mind, even after he moved to the West Coast.

A decade ago, his wife noticed that a local junior college was offering a six-week beekeeping course, so the Santa Rosa, CA Branch 183 member signed up. After taking the class, he decided to try it for himself.

So far, he's built up half a dozen apiaries (locations where beehives are kept) throughout Sonoma County, CA, with eight to 10 colonies in each one. (A colony's size varies throughout the year—perhaps 3,000 to 5,000 bees in the winter, and then 60,000 to 70,000 bees in the summer.)

A few colonies are at Cook's home, mostly in his garage, and the beekeeping operation often spills out to the driveway. "Much to my wife's chagrin," he says, adding, "She's allergic to bees." On occasion, even his own curious neighborhood letter carriers will stop to ask about his setup.

Cook also created a business out of beekeeping about four years ago, called Straightline Bee Co. "I started the business with the idea that I'm only a few years from retirement" and wanted to be able to keep busy at that point, he said.

There are three main parts of his business operation: honey sales, hive management and bee removal.

To sell honey, he uses a waiting list that people sign up for (including fellow letter carriers). If he ends up with an excess amount, "I have a few places I can offload extra gallons to," he said,

including a mead maker who produces the alcoholic beverage made of water and honey, malt and yeast. He's also been known to drop off some honey at his union hall.

In addition to his own hives, he manages apiaries for others around the county, mostly on friends' properties in rural areas. One such setup is at a winery, whose owners asked him to take care of their bees on their property, and Cook also has a contract with a golf course in Santa Rosa, which was looking for someone to maintain their bees.

For the bee removal part of the business, Cook will go rescue bees that are in places they don't belong and perform what are called "structural extractions." Cook has found colonies in floors, ceilings and attics in houses and other buildings.

"I'm one of a handful of people in the area who do that," he said, adding that he belongs to an active local beekeepers association, which keeps a list of people who are willing to perform the extractions.

He normally works alone. On occasion, though, his 17-year-old daughter, Lola, will help him tend to the bees.

Cook, a 33-year letter carrier and an Army veteran, has been working full time the past seven years as a Step B representative for the San Francisco District Dispute Resolution Team, after five years as a backup. In addition, he serves as Branch 183 vice president and also is a letter carrier congressional liaison.

The hobby of beekeeping is a largely seasonal endeavor. Pollen is the bees' main protein source, and it is mostly available during the warmer months. Bees then build up the honey supply to get through the winter. "This is the busiest time of year right now," Cook



Cook sells his honey through the Straight-line Bee Co.

Cook holds up a frame into which his bees built their honeycomb.



said. “They’re quiet during the winter.”

In California, however, that doesn’t last very long. “We don’t stay cold,” the carrier says. When the thermometer hits 45 to 50 degrees, “they’ll start flying.”

Spring is by far the busiest season, Cook explains, because the hives are building up fast and producing brood in anticipation of the coming nectar flow. “They’re building new comb in any available space,” he said, “and most importantly, they are raising new queens to ‘throw off swarms,’ which is how they reproduce at the colony level.”

The carrier elaborated that if beekeepers don’t anticipate this and do what they can to keep bees from swarming, two things can happen: 1) The bee workforce that is needed to bring in the nectar flow is lost, and there will not be any excess honey that can be extracted that year from that hive; and 2) Swarms can be a nuisance for neighbors, and if not discovered and collected, they can move into people’s houses, requiring invasive removals.

Because of all this, Cook said, hives “have to be inspected every week and additional space provided as needed.”

When he heads to the hives, as equipment he brings a bucket, a belt with tools, a facial veil and a smoker (as using smoke helps to keep bees calm while he’s working).

Tending to bees requires a watchful eye. “The goal as a beekeeper is to make sure they have room, but not too much room.”

If honeybees have too much room, it’s hard for them to thermal regulate the colony. “They have to keep the brood nest at about 92 to 94 degrees Fahrenheit, no matter what the outside temperature,” Cook said. “Also, having too much room leaves room for

various pests such as wax moths and small hive beetles, making it harder for the bees to police all the space.”

Most of Cook’s hives are the Langstroth variety, which have vertically hung frames in square boxes. There is a deeper box on the bottom and a bottom board where bees can enter, a shallow box on top for honey, and a top cap for protection from the weather. Each box contains 10 frames, into which the bees build honeycomb.

In the warmer months, he’ll add boxes to all of the apiaries as the colonies grow. Then, “in the winter, I do the opposite,” he said. “That’s the cycle—they build up, then shrink down.”

When you see bees swarming, that means a hive has raised a new queen, and then the old queen has left with some bees to scout a new location. “We try to catch them then to start a new hive,” Cook said.

Though people have a tendency to be scared of bees, the carrier says there’s little reason to be. “I’ve learned to pay attention to their temperament. I don’t get stung frequently,” he said. “With the rare exception, they’re not aggressive. They’re doing their thing and are out collecting. If you leave them alone, they’ll leave you alone.”

Bees are important in part because they help to pollinate crops. “There aren’t enough native pollinators,” Cook said. “Honeybees are an agricultural commodity. They’re sort of a work horse in our agricultural system.”

He adds that “every third or fifth bite you take has been pollinated by honeybees.”

Indeed, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, pollination by managed honeybee colonies adds at least \$15 billion to the value of U.S. agriculture annually through increased yields and superior-quality harvests.

For anyone wanting to start their own hive, Cook has some advice: Take some classes and find a mentor. “You need to have a real understanding of bee biology to be successful,” he said.

As he gets closer to retirement, Cook hopes to expand his business, which he documents on Instagram at @straightlinebeeco. “I’d like to do more raising of queen [bees] and selling queens locally,” he said. And because blackberries are grown fairly nearby, he’d like to take advantage by bringing his bees close to the crop in the spring-time more often, as it makes for good honey. One thing he’s not sure he’ll keep up is taking bees out of buildings, describing it as “physical work.”

And why does Cook personally love bees so much?

“It’s hard to articulate,” he said. “They’re really fascinating creatures [and] really addictive once you’ve started working with them.” **PR**