Food Researched: Honey
Focus of Research: History and Culture
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Title

History and Culture of the Honeybee in America

Objective(s)

I aim to provide a comprehensive history of the honeybee in America, from its arrival in the 17th century to its current status in society as both a food item and a cultural symbol. I plan to follow the honeybee through American history, focusing on technological advances that have transformed honey production into the industry it is today. I will investigate the role of the honeybee in larger societal issues such as racial conflict and gender equality through the lens of advertisements and marketing. Finally, I will consider the influence that honeybees have on modern agricultural thought and what this means for America in the future.

Summary of Findings

Early Beekeeping in America: 1600s to 1800s

The practice of beekeeping in America is rooted in 17th century Europe. According to Tammy Horn, beeswax and honey were staples of medieval and renaissance life in England, and they were important to the Queen as well as to peasants. British writers used the beehive as a symbol that helped reinforce hierarchical and patriarchal power structures (Horn, 7). In 1609, Queen Elizabeth’s beekeeper defined male honeybees as “drones,” and this term became associated with the unemployed, starving people that would soon become American colonists (Horn, 11).

According to Brenda Kellar, an English ship brought the honeybee to the east coast of North America in 1622 (Kellar, 1). Finno-Swedes brought German bees to the colonies in 1638, and French Huguenots brought sophisticated beekeeping skills to the east coast in 1685 (Horn, 27). Honey hunting soon became one of the first American pastimes (Horn, 30). In fact, colonists appropriated the word “bee” to refer to a social gathering (Horn, 30). Until sugarcane became an established commodity in the colonies, honey was an important sweetener, medicinal liquid, and brewing agent, just like it had
been in England (Horn, 36). Americans did not only adopt England’s practical uses of honeybees, but also the values and symbolism associated with the honeybee. During the American Revolution, writers used the drone bee image to influence how American colonists perceived tax collectors – as people who did no work of their own and simply lived off of others (Horn, 53).

Horn hypothesizes that American beekeeping owes its development to Africans as well as Europeans. She writes that African-American slaves came from beekeeping countries and brought their honey-hunting skills to America (Horn, 49). From looking at recipes and songs, she concludes that slaves used honey before coming to America and incorporated it into plantation menus (Horn, 103). Additionally, Native Americans incorporated beeswax and honey into their frontier barter system between slaves, French traders, English, German, and Dutch settlers (Horn, 42). This fact suggests that from early on, honey played an important role in fostering the complex relationships within American society.

In the mid 19th century, Samuel Harbison initiated a “beekeeping goldrush” when he created a hive that could safely package and transport honeybees (Horn, 96). With this development, as well as some natural dispersal, honeybees began to migrate westward along water routes (Horn, 38). During this time period the honeybee became associated with values of westward expansion – values that brought Americans closer together and fostered a sense of patriotism (Horn 69). Horn (140) writes: “In the absence of a common political party, religion or language, many beekeepers found a niche in the emerging American industrial landscape through their love of bees.”

Technological Advances: Late 1800s to Early 1900s

In 1851, Lorenzo Langstroth revolutionized beekeeping by inventing a hive that is compatible with the way that bees build wax combs (Horn, 65). With this development, beekeeping changed from a cottage industry into a profitable one. Bees benefited from better care and large-scale commercial agriculture of tree and vegetable crops, which transformed both America’s landscape and its role as a political power (Horn, 68).

Around the same time, Langstroth also began importing Italian bees into America, which met many of the needs of the 19th century American beekeepers. Italian bees could withstand cold temperatures, they were gentler than other bees, the queens were more prolific, and they were more resistant to certain diseases (Horn, 91).

Several other inventions shortly followed that of the Langstroth hive. The comb foundation of 1857, centrifugal honey extractor of 1865, and bellows smoker of 1873 all aided in transforming beekeeping from a hobby to an industry (Horn, 97). However, there was some backlash following these new developments from both old honey hunters and
the general public. Old honey hunters became anti-bee monopolists and challenged honey’s cultural shift (Horn, 128). In 1870, H.O. Peabody created another honey extractor that made the chore much less labor-intensive (Horn, 123). As a result, liquid honey became available on a commercial scale, but many people rejected it because they refused to believe that it was actually pure honey.

By looking at the Lippincott Farmer’s Manual of 1916, it is clear that honey had become an established industry by the 20th century. In the manual, Frank C. Pellet (283) writes: “Beekeeping is now a recognized industry in itself and the owner of bees enjoys the same rights and privileges as holders of other property.”

**Women and Beekeeping: Late 1800s to Early 1900s**

During the Civil War, women were left to look after their husbands’ beehives, and by the 1870s many women were educated about beekeeping (Horn, 115). Several women in America became prominent beekeepers, and in some states beekeeping became a step towards gender equality (Horn, 118). In Utah, for instance, women beekeepers were given as much respect as men in their society (Horn, 118). In the Dakota territories, men and women shared work associated with beekeeping and honey production, but the chores were often divided along gender lines. While men were given the social role of beekeeper, women did most of the honey production (Horn, 118).

Women continued to gain standing in the beekeeping community from 1880 to 1900 (Horn, 134). The *Ladies Home Journal* advised women to become beekeepers because it was a “healthful” and “lucrative” job (Horn, 134). The journal also suggested that women are better beekeepers than men because of their patience and gentler touch. This encouragement toward beekeeping came from within the female community, because women believed that beekeeping could take the place of their postwar domestic ideal (Horn, 135). By the early 1900s, women were “welcomed into the industry with open arms” (Horn, 150).

**Honey in the Media: Late 1800s to early 1900s**

With the mechanization of the printing press in the early 19th century, the image of the bee hunter was marketed as a man “pushing the boundaries of the frontier, one foot in the wild, one foot in civilization, independent, isolated, and loving only the order of the hive” (Horn, 73). Narratives from this time period portrayed the bee hunter as someone who moved on the margins of society searching for liquid gold rather than cities of gold (Horn, 73). Writers from this time period also wrote about bees and honey in a propagandistic way, creating the impression that America could right the wrongs of European culture (Horn, 85).
In 1861, Samuel Wagner started the *American Bee Journal* to educate the public about beekeeping (Horn, 104). Although beekeeping stopped during the Civil War, it regained popularity afterwards. A column from the *American Bee Journal* said that there is “scarcely a village in the country that might not readily keep as many hives of bees as dwelling houses” (Horn, 25). In 1869, A.I. Root commercialized beekeeping by standardizing the Langstroth hive and publishing a how-to book called *The ABC and XYZ of Bee Culture* (Horn, 104). Root formed a major bee supply company by the end of the century.

Honey advertisements from the late 19th and early 20th centuries reveal the social conditions of the time period and the role of the honey industry in this system. In the Lippincott manual, Pellet stresses the importance of advertising honey. He distinguishes between general advertising, in which the goal is simply to increase the public’s consumption of honey, and advertisements that promote the product of a particular apiary (Pellet, 267-8). An example of general advertising from this time period was the use of little red stickers that said “Eat Honey,” which were pasted on thousands of envelopes containing outgoing mail (Figure 1). Similarly, the Iowa Beekeeper’s Association printed large placards that said “Eat Honey with Your Christmas Dinner,” which were placed in stores selling honey, and other apiaries simply displayed large signs saying “Eat Honey” (Pellet, 269; Figures 2 and 3).

Other types of honey advertisements from this time included images of children, the countryside, and beautiful women. Horn (153) writes that beeswax and honey were ingredients in many cosmetics, thus bees became associated with beauty. Additionally, she writes that honey and beeswax became prized commodities when women decided to wear makeup. The focuses on children and landscapes were intended to distract shoppers from any fear of bees that they might have. Figure 5 is an advertisement marketed to children from the 1930s featuring Hopalong Cassidy, the hero of a series of children’s stories (Horn, 170).

During the period of Reconstruction, many American beekeepers rebuilt their lives in new regions with new ethnic groups (Horn, 121). Thus the subject of race comes into play with honey advertising. Honey marketers promoted their products by using images of children and other races to suggest a “simpler time” (Horn, 168). The Sioux Bee Honey Association, for example, chose an Indian princess as their company icon in 1921 (Horn, 168). This campaign was successful but problematic because it suggested that all Indians were the same, and the image “fixed the Indian in the past” (Horn, 169). A similarly problematic yet popular honey label from the early 1920s portrayed a black child with a missing tooth eating pancakes (Horn, 170; Figure 4). Bee and honey companies therefore enforced stereotypes of rural blacks as they sold their products.
Marketing Honey: Early 1900s to Present

In the Lippincott Farmer’s Manual from 1916, Pellet (257) writes, “It is a fortunate thing for the business that honey production is rapidly passing into the hands of specialists who know how to prepare their product for market in attractive condition and that the small farm apiaries are rapidly passing away in most places.” This quote demonstrates the shift from small bee farms (apiaries) to commercialized honey production. Along with commercialized production came commercialized packaging. “One of the very best advertisements for the honey producer,” Pellet writes, “is an attractive package decidedly different from those for sale in the general market” (Pellet, 273). He recounts an experiment he did in which he sold honey in both normal mason jars and fancier jars with nice labels. The jar with the more attractive appearance sold six to ten times as much honey, which was his proof that visual appeal affects customers’ purchases (Pellet, 247).

Many years after Pellet published this advice, in 1957, the founders of the Dutch Gold Honey Company created the first squeezable honey bear (Dutch Gold; Figure 6). This packaging invention is a perfect example of successful marketing. Dutch Gold popularized the honey bear, and it soon became an “American cultural icon” (Citizendium). In fact, a survey from 1995 reports that 15.5% of the honey sold in the United States is packaged bear-shaped bottles (Citizendium).

Modern Agricultural Developments and Though: 1900s to the Future

Urban developments of the late 20th century have had harmful effects on bee populations. Phoenix, Arizona, for instance, has seen its bee diversity plummet throughout its development into a paved and sprawling city (Cormier, 63). Isolated parks and green islands are not enough to sustain bee populations because they lead to inbreeding, which weakens the genetic code of the species (for more information see paper by Anna Reed).

According to Brendan Cormier, the current interest in locally produced food has “exalted the profile of the bee” with plans to farm honey in cities (Cormier, 61). Food activists and community groups have already installed beehives in community gardens in order to educate people about ecological processes (Cormier, 62). In Toronto, a team of researchers working with the Toronto Beekeepers Cooperative is studying how the bee population can help sustain an urban agricultural movement (Cormier, 62). This is the first study of its kind, and it is crucial because there are many obstacles to bringing bees into urban food production. Many people consider bees pests, and there are laws placing spatial limits on beekeeping (Cormier, 63).

Cormier (64) concludes his article on a hopeful note with a plea for change. He starts off by saying, “Policies regarding beekeeping need to be altered, and green roof
practices need to be refined. Most importantly, an education campaign needs to be sustained to get people over their fears and misconceptions about bees,” and concludes with: “Strides have been made by simply beginning to address the issue. Non-anthropocentric design thinking opens up new opportunities for ecological design innovation, and it is evident that bees have become the stepping stone to this kind of thinking.”

Sources


