



# Laurence Cutts

Jennifer Berry

He's been in the middle of everything honey bees have.

If you ever meet Laurence Cutts, from Florida, you would never forget him. He is one of a kind who is always willing to share his knowledge and experiences about bees, beekeeping, and life in general. I sat with Laurence during lunch recently, and in between bites, I asked him to share his life as an apiary inspector and beekeeper. Here is his story.

Laurence is a third generation beekeeper with his legacy dating back to 1889 when his grandfather started keeping bees. Over time, the business grew and he became a prominent queen and package producer in Montgomery County, Alabama. Eventually Laurence's father took over the business and had many successful years himself until the need for lumber almost put him out of business. It was 1943, WWII was in full swing and the demand for timber was great. Numerous (tulip) poplar trees were being cut in and around his apiaries for the war effort. Since these trees were a major nectar source for the bees he was forced to purchase and feed sugar, which greatly cut into his profits – and profits were scarce during the war. Earlier, he had expanded his operation by moving colonies to Florida. Thinking he would have to feed them also, he headed south only to find the colonies were “plugged up” with honey. A decision was made on the spot and he relocated the business and his family to Chipley, Florida.

Laurence worked for his father but started taking on more responsibilities during the 1970s, eventually taking over the business. He,

too, was involved in the queen and package industry but expanded the business into honey production. Laurence had colonies all throughout North and Central Florida, and North Carolina but moved them to the Everglades when soybeans in his area were treated with regular applications of Sevin® dust.

However, shortly after his travels south Laurence found himself out of the queen and package business due to the discovery of tracheal mites. Packages and queens were quarantined in Florida in an effort to contain the pest. Unfortunately, most of the packages Laurence sold were sent to Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. Laurence decided to shift gears and convert the business over to honey production, but with a poor spring flow, profits were lost. Laurence said he “saw the hand writing on the wall.” Right about this time, the State Apiary Inspector in Florida, Leroy Putnam, died of a heart attack. After Mr. Putnam's death the agriculture commissioner asked Laurence to help in the search for a new state inspector. The search ended when Laurence was convinced to take the position in 1985. As Laurence puts it “I got my first job one day before my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday.” He worked 18 years as chief apiary inspector for the state of Florida. This was a rough time for the beekeeping industry: introduction of tracheal mites, *Varroa* mites, small hive beetles, and rampant resistance to AFB. As a honey bee inspector, Laurence was exposed to the good, the bad and the ugly, but

he loved every minute. Laurence's retirement came during another dark time for Florida's beekeepers: the arrival of Africanized honey bees. Not only is this a problem for the beekeeper who may be exposed to an Africanized colony but the backlash from media sensationalism that may erupt after the first stinging episode could be devastating to the industry. Public hysteria could lead to a ban on beekeeping in certain counties and urban areas throughout Florida and the Southeast. Laurence feels the hobby and backyard beekeepers will be a great asset in the fight against AHB's. He explained how managed colonies saturating an area will be the first defense against AHB's becoming established.

Sideliners are also some of the most knowledgeable and politically influential people in the industry. Laurence said “they're the real promoters and educators in the business because they're usually the ones speaking to schools and various groups on the importance of bees and beekeeping.”

Hopefully, as the public becomes aware that bees will not invade their home through windows and chimneys, knock over furniture and chew through doors to sting them, the misconception about Hollywood's “killer bees” will subside. But until then, education will be the beekeeper's best defense.

Even though Laurence has been involved in the beekeeping industry for decades now, he is also well-known for his story telling. Beekeepers always have a tale to tell, but just imagine the situations state inspectors are exposed to when dealing with the public. For instance . . . One day a lady phoned and was hysterically screaming about killer bees surrounding her home. She explained how no one in the entire trailer park could open their doors due to the fear of being stung to death. She wanted somebody to come now and “git rid of these varmints before they kill us all.” Laurence tried to talk some sense into her by explaining that Florida didn't have killer bees at this time, but she wouldn't listen. Laurence told her he would send an inspector right away to check out these “killer bees” and take a sample. The lady and her husband were retired

and lived in a small trailer park with about six other trailers. When the inspector arrived he immediately knew the “varmints” were not killer bees but in fact your run of the mill hornet. During his visit that day the entire story was revealed. The hornets had built their nest inside an old magnolia tree in front of the lady’s trailer. The husband loved that old tree, and knowing this, his wife threatened to cut down the tree if her husband didn’t take care of the “bee problem.” So he grabbed an old cane fishing pole, tiptoed toward the nest and beat it to a pulp. Unfortunately for him, he only destroyed the nest and not the inhabitants inside. They took to the air. With no home to return to, the hornets were flying haphazardly around the park. The husband had taken several stings, so the people in the trailer park were afraid to venture outside with all these mad hornets flying around. The inspector calmly informed the residents that the hornets would soon disperse and life would return to normal. Lawrence never received another call from that trailer park again.

Soon after that there was another killer bee incident to deal with. A lady called from Miami complaining about a killer bee that was trying to attack her through the window. Lawrence asked her to describe “the bee” which she quickly informed him was two inches long and fire red. It was beating itself against the window screen she explained and trying to get in the house to kill her. Lawrence knew that it wasn’t a killer bee and again tried to explain this to the women. She wasn’t convinced and as hysteria grew in her voice Lawrence assured her someone was on the way. When the inspector arrived at the apartment, he knocked several times on the door but there was no answer. Eventually somebody came out from next door explaining that the lady who lived there was taken back to the mental facility.

I asked Lawrence to describe one of the scariest situations he remembers as a beekeeper and he immediately began to tell me about the time when he and his son were moving a load of bees out of the Everglades. It was late and they were just about to arrive at the bee-

yard located several miles off a paved road. The two trucks were loaded down with colonies which were packed with honey. Add to that, it had been a particularly wet Spring and the dirt road they were traversing had numerous mud holes and ruts. His son, while driving the two-ton truck, tried to avoid one of these mud holes by going around it. Unbeknownst to him, there in the dark lay an even bigger hole and the back-end of the truck slowly sank into a sea of mud and muck. The truck was leaning over to such a degree they just knew it was going to lay over on its side at any moment releasing all 120 colonies. After inspection they realized a wrecker would offer no assistance so they opted for plan B; jack up the truck and hopefully drive it out themselves. They drove home, picked up their 12-ton jack, stirred the parts-man out of bed in order to purchase another 12-ton jack, and collected all the timbers they could find. When they returned, Lawrence began shoveling mud from around the tires until he could get the jack under the rim. The process was taking hours and all the while Lawrence worried that the truck would tumble over and bury him in a sea of mud and angry bees. To prevent this from happening, he cut a scrub oak tree and propped it against the truck in hopes of stabilizing it. However, he knew the tree was no match against the two-ton truck if it began to lay over. “It would have been as useful as a toothpick in ice cream if that truck began to roll.” After hours of hard work, the truck was freed, the bees unloaded and they were finally home, safe in bed.

Lawrence told me many stories that day I visited with him in Florida. I’ve only been able to share a few with you, however I did save the best for last.

Lawrence and his oldest son were moving bees down to the Everglades when they decided to pull off the road and “check the load.” They were somewhere north of Brooksville on a dark, lonely stretch of highway with not a car in sight. Now when a beekeeper says he’s going to “check the load” while standing on a lonely stretch of road, he’s probably not thinking about checking the bees. Anyway, it hadn’t

been two minutes since they pulled over when they heard the sound of a car engine crank up about a quarter of a mile down the road. Then all of a sudden this raggedy, old car flew up behind them and slammed on the brakes. A crazy looking character jumped out of the car screaming, “Did you see them, did you see them?” Lawrence of course replied with a touch of apprehension in his voice, “Did I see what?” “The UFOs!” the excited man exclaimed, “they’re everywhere, everywhere, I see them all the time.” He began explaining to Lawrence and his son that there were these small UFOs flying overhead every night and when a plane flew by to investigate, they would quickly fly back to the mother ship and disappear. He also rambled on about how they could read your mind and that he’d been waiting for years for them to come and take him for a ride. He repeatedly stated how he wanted to “ride really bad.” Lawrence and his son wished him luck and quickly returned to the truck. Safely inside and several miles down the road, Lawrence looked over at his son and said “Were you thinking the same thing I was?” His son replied without hesitation, “Don’t come get him now! Don’t come get him now! Don’t come get him now!” Fortunately for the both of them, the aliens were able to read their minds instead.

Lawrence retired two years ago and is now back in the bee business. He keeps around 300 colonies for the production of honey and hopes to build a honey house next year. I asked him what was the best part of his job, and he told me it was working with beekeepers and the wonderful educational opportunities he enjoyed during his 18 years of service. Lawrence is still making the rounds at local, state and national meetings. If you see him at a meeting ask him for a story, and he’ll certainly oblige since he has hundreds.

See y’all soon. **BC**

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*Jennifer Berry does research on Varroa resistant queens at the University of Georgia in Athens. She is also the President for EAS 2006 which will be at Young Harris College in Georgia in August this year.*