

# Bob & Suzette Binnie

Jennifer Berry



## A well run commercial operation in Georgia.

Since being elected president of the Georgia Beekeeping Association last year, Bob Binnie has worked exceptionally hard to organize meetings that are not only educational but also entertaining. If you attended the Spring GBA meeting in Covington this past February then you experienced just that: a well assembled, informative, fun meeting. Well, he is doing it again for this year's GBA fall meeting. It will take place September 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> at the Rabun County Civic Center in Clayton, Georgia. Bob has brought

together top-notch speakers from across the U.S. to address issues that are important to beekeepers. He has also arranged for a laid back evening in which we will be entertained by an auctioneer while consuming fresh shrimp, sausage, corn and potatoes. Not only is the program exceptional but the location of the meeting is picture perfect. The mountainous region of North Eastern Georgia is breathtaking. Since the meeting is in close proximity to North and South Carolina, we Georgians would like

to extend an invitation across the border for you to attend. For those who aren't Carolinians, please don't misunderstand, we extend the invitation to you as well. Anyone, anywhere is welcomed. It would be our pleasure to host our neighbors and kin alike. Here's a sample of what to expect at the GBA Fall meeting.

Dr. Tom Rinderer will be joining us to share his experiences in research and queen rearing. Dr. Rinderer is the Research Leader for the USDA lab in Baton Rouge which focuses on bee breeding, genetics, and physiology research. Dr. Rinderer has been heavily involved with developing genetically resistant lines of queens.

*One of Bob's many beeyards in north Georgia. Notice the bear fence. No fence, no bees in the mountains.*



*Removing honey.*



Unloading supers. Note the gate, storage boxes and tie downs.

The line he is most passionate about originated in Russia and are called, easy enough, "Russians." He will talk about his experiences with the Russian line, their traits and the Russian Bee Breeder Program.

Another heavy hitter in the Russian world of queen rearing is Carl Webb. He will be giving us more information about Russian stock and how he keeps bees without using chemicals.

Dann Purvis, owner and creator of Purvis Brothers' Apiaries, will be sharing his experiences with queen breeding and how he developed his

own resistance stock by selecting for survivability.

A Californian will be joining us also. If you have in recent years picked up an issue of the *American Bee Journal* then you have come across the name Randy Oliver. Randy is a monthly contributor to the magazine focusing on issues that effect beekeepers today. He is a teacher and researcher in all things to do with honey bees.

Steve Forrest, always a crowd pleaser, will be talking about the evolution of beekeeping equipment. Steve is owner of Brushy Mountain

Bob checking for moisture.



Cowen 60 frame air ram parallel radial extractor.

Bee Farm and has been in the business of honey bees for over thirty years.

Berry Wright from the Wrights Honey will be teaching about Fall management while working colonies in the beeyard. He has been a beekeeper for decades with his operation located in the mountains of North Georgia.

And of course Robert Brewer will be helping us to prepare honey for show. For more information about the meeting you can go to the GBA website at [gabeekeeping.com](http://gabeekeeping.com). Hope to see you there. It will be worth it!

Before you arrive to the meeting there is some history I found out about the man who made it all happen, Bob Binnie. This past spring I sat down with Bob and Suzette Binnie and got a brief glimpse of their past and how beekeeping became their future.

Years ago, Bob was living in California when he married his wife Suzette. Shortly after their wedding they decided to move to Alaska. They packed up their belongings, threw them into a 20-year-old pick up truck and headed north with only \$700 in their pockets. They weren't too concerned about what they would do when they arrived because at the time the pipeline was being built, so jobs were plentiful. Bob and Suzette settled in the back country of the Wrangell Mountains of Alaska. After many different side jobs, Bob landed



300 gallon honey tanks.



Part of Bob's bottling process.



Bob's honey.

employment as a Winter watchman for a hunting camp and then later guided big game hunters through the rough terrain. They lived in a rustic, 16 X 16 foot cabin, but for two adventurous spirits, it was just ideal.

Living in Alaska definitely has it fine points: majestic mountains, untamed wilderness, wide open spaces, unimaginable night skies, minimal people, and crystal clear streams. However, the winters can be harsh. It's not just the extreme cold, blowing snow and howling wind that can take its toll while living off the beaten path but also the isolation. So during these days of confinement Bob read, and read, and then read some more. One day he came across information about beekeeping in a Mother Earth catalog and it caught his attention. He didn't realize it then but beekeeping was about to become his life's ambition. Immediately he ordered Walter T. Kelly's book, *How to Keep Bees and Sell Honey*. After reading the book from cover to cover Bob was hooked and began to order every beekeeping book he could get his hands on. He said he knew instantly that commercial beekeeping was for him. However, he had never laid his hands in or even near a colony of bees.

When the weather allowed, Bob ventured out and met with local beekeepers. One in particular, a retired beekeeper, gave him some excellent advice. He told Bob that before he started his own business

he recommended that he work for a commercial beekeeper. He explained about the numerous pitfalls involved with beekeeping. He told Bob it was essential for him to work with a professional. It will help you avoid potentially hazardous career moves which inevitably come with a lack of experience. So after six years of living in the wilderness of Alaska, Bob and Suzette packed up and headed to Oregon where Bob took the advice and worked for a commercial beekeeper. Beekeeping came very easy to Bob. During the three years of his employment Bob learned about pollinating almonds in California, pears in Oregon, apples in Washington, and honey production in North Dakota. Bob slowly built up his own outfit on the side (500 colonies) while absorbing every bit of knowledge he could. Once he was confident to step out on his own, Bob began pollinating numerous crops in California and Oregon. This was his life for 10 years.

A job offer brought Bob and Suzette to the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Georgia where he briefly changed careers and no longer kept bees. But it didn't take him long to quickly build up colonies and return to what he loved the most, beekeeping. For the first time Bob decided to delve into honey production. The West coast offered pollination while the North Georgia Mountains offered sourwood honey.

Bob's beekeeping operation over

the years has ranged from 400 to 700 colonies, but for a one man operation the optimal number for him is 500. Along with producing his own honey Bob also buys and packs honey from beekeepers he trusts. He sells to grocery stores, produce stands, farmers markets and to other beekeepers. But lately Bob has begun selling nucs. This past year he sold over 600. Presently his honey operation consists of the optimal number of colonies, 500, with half located at permanent locations in North Georgia and Western North Carolina. The other half are situated on four-way pallets and travel back and forth from North to South Georgia.

Since Bob has been in Georgia he has become a member of the Georgia Beekeepers Association, and the Macon County Beekeepers Association in North Carolina. He is also a member of the Mountain and North East Georgia Mountain Beekeepers Association. The latter he served as president for three consecutive terms. Currently he is the president of the Georgia Beekeepers Association and in 2003 received the Beekeeper of the Year Award. He has also served as a board member for the GBA several times. Not only does he take on these extra activities but he is often a guest speaker for many clubs and associations and teaches numerous classes at Beekeeping Schools. Honestly, I don't know where he finds the time but he always does.

The first opportunity I had to work with Bob in the field was one Spring about six years ago. The UGA bee lab was starting a queen breeding program and Bob generously donated over 100 frames of bees, brood and 50 queens. I gained a lot of experience working with Bob. He was very calm and methodical in his techniques. It was obvious while working with him that his beekeeping experience spanned decades. That's not the only time Bob has helped out our lab and hence other beekeepers. Several years ago he was very instrumental in providing bees, equipment and time for a three year IPM research project.

Bob is a conscientious beekeeper who is not only concerned with his own bees but the future of beekeeping in general. He is always researching and fine tuning ways to become a better beekeeper. For instance he doesn't fall into the philosophy that newer, stronger or a combination of chemicals are the answer to our beekeeping problems. He believes that healthier bees are born in chemical free environments. One way he avoids using harsh chemical treatments is by choosing superior bee stock. His primary stock comes from queens purchased from Dann Purvis. In addition to Purvis Brother's queens he has Russian and South Georgian blood mixed in as well. "I want bees that won't succumb to every little snuffle that comes around" he says. So he chooses wisely. Bob is also aware of the number of colonies he puts into a yard. Only 32 colonies are allowed. "The more colonies per yard the worse they perform" he said.

Bob also shared his step by step procedure of how he gets his honey from the apiary to the extracting room, a timely piece of advice right now. He starts by making a trip to the beeyard the day before he plans to pull honey and places escape boards on all his colonies. "Most commercial beekeepers would probably think I'm crazy for doing this because it adds an extra trip into the formula. However it removes the bees with minimal disturbance to the colony, you are in and out quickly, there is little to no robbing and they clean up the dripping burr comb by the next day". He can enter a yard, pull the honey supers, toss them onto his truck and be gone. However, Bob explained that you **must** have bee tight equipment or

this method will not work. Normally in the field his is a one man operation except for when he is pulling honey. His neighbor joins him for the time it takes to remove all the supers which helps out tremendously. During some months he has a college student who builds equipment and another person to help bottle honey.

Once at home, Bob unloads the supers with a hand truck and places them into a "comb room." This room has a de-humidifier which removes any excess moisture from the honey. He won't extract honey until the moisture content is 18% or lower. Once the honey is ready he moves eight supers at a time into his extracting room. Here he places the supers into a Cowen uncapper in preparation for the conveyer which loads them into a 60 frame, parallel radial extractor. Bob explained if he has all his ducks in a row he can extract 200-240 supers per day by himself.

The honey flows into a two barrel sump tank below the floor. When the tank is full an automatic pump kicks on and sends it into one of four, 300 gallon settling tanks. "Our honey is course filtered not micro filtered or pasteurized so we can advertise it as natural and raw" he says. Once the honey has settled for several days

he begins to bottle it directly from the tanks into drums for storage or individual jars and buckets for sale. He wholesales about 85% of his crop by the case, while the rest is sold in buckets or drums.

Bob and Suzette raised three children all of whom have worked at one point in their life for the family business. Suzette runs the book-keeping, shipping and website for the operation. Their oldest son is returning this year and will be distributing honey in Atlanta. This past spring when I had the opportunity to sit and talk at length with Bob and Suzette I realized that a story about their honey bee operation, the Blue Ridge Honey Company, needed to be written. Their dedication to the well being of honey bees, producing quality honey in America, the beekeeping industry, and the environment is admirable. How lucky Georgia is to have such an outstanding beekeeping operation and beekeeper in her midst. The saying definitely applies here; honesty and hard work pays off (for us!).

See ya! **BC**

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