



# Rossman Apiaries

Jennifer Berry

You've probably met Fred and Ann at a beekeeper meeting. There's a lot of history, and great people standing behind that table.

The U.S. beekeeping community is relatively small when you look at the numbers. Roughly there are 1200 full-time commercial operations, 5000 part-time sideliners and between 120,000 and 150,000 backyard beekeepers. If you read the journals, magazines, newsletters or attend meetings you are bound to become familiar with certain names, especially those that have been in the business for sometime now. One of those names is Rossman Apiaries located in Moultrie, Georgia. Fred Rossman, owner and operator of Rossman Apiaries, is well known and respected

by beekeepers from coast-to-coast for his ability to provide quality bees and beekeeping equipment, but there's a lot more to him than that. Fred is one of those rare souls whom, when you meet him, you instantly feel at ease because he tells it like it is, and, when he says he's going to do something, you can bank on it.

But, Fred's also known for reinvesting in both his community and the beekeeping industry through public speaking, education, and his various leadership roles. He's been Director of the American Bee Breeders Association, a Board Member for

several terms for the American Beekeeping Federation. Locally, he has served as President for the Civic Club, and Board of Deacons and Elders for the First Presbyterian Church. He has also served several terms as President and Board Member for the Georgia Beekeepers Association who, by the way, recently recognized Fred with their highest award: Georgia "Beekeeper of the Year" for 2011. Recently, I was fortunate enough to have a private audience with Fred and queried him about his life and business. Fred is a quiet fellow and is somewhat reluctant to talk about



*Fred Rossman and his good friend.*



*Ann Rossman.*

himself. But, he was generous with his time and energy, and eventually shared a good bit of history about Rossman Apiaries, his family and his philosophy that I believe beekeepers would enjoy hearing (reading) as much as I did! Let's start from the beginning.

Fred's Father, Joseph "Joe" Grey Rossman, oldest of nine children, grew up on a dairy farm. Each day he milked the cows, fed the cows, cleaned up after the cows, and delivered milk from the cows. So, by the time he was a young man, he was pretty much done with the cows. Across the street, there lived a beekeeper that roused Joe's interest. From time to time, Joe would wonder over to learn the nuts and bolts of his trade. Over the years, this routine slowly carved a path, which led him to a new career. One day in 1934, Joe left the dairy farm to work for the Puetts in Hahira, Georgia, who were the largest queen and package producers in the state. The small town of Hahira was eventually known as the "Queen Bee Capital of the World." Joe worked there for several years until he met a beekeeper from St. Paris, Ohio, E. W. Long (short for Emerson W.).

Like most large, Northern operations, E.W. would transport his colonies down South, specifically Georgia, during the Winter months. Then, in the Spring, he would make splits and haul them back North to sell. Joe and E. W. joined forces in 1936 and started a partnership called Rossman & Long. E.W. concentrated on the northern end of things while Joe worked the southern. They sold bees, queens, and nucs. They remained business partners for 14 years and parted as friends when Joe formed Rossman Apiaries in 1952. Joe continued producing queens, packages and nucs, and occasionally delved into honey production, albeit only as an afterthought when there were surplus quantities.

During our conversation about the history of Rossman's Apiaries, Fred reminisced for a moment about a trip that he and his father took to North Georgia to deliver honey, which was a particularly long journey from South Georgia in the 1950s. Once they arrived at the Tallulah Gorge, a two mile long and 1,000 foot deep Southern Appalachian canyon, Fred and his father parked the truck, and walked to the center of the bridge

*Queen Cell Production.*



spanning the gorge. Joe took out one of those big-headed, wooden match sticks, told his son to watch this, and dropped it over the side. Fred said, "No joke; just before that match hit the bottom of the canyon, it lit."

Fred and his siblings worked for the family business as they grew up. Hence, when Fred graduated from high school, he already knew exactly what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. Actually, he had always known. Though, there was an opportunity to go to college and, through the persuasion of his parents, he begrudgingly pursued it. By the time his junior year at Auburn University came around, he had had enough of college. He drove home to tell his folks. His mother looked at him and said, "You need to finish." His Father, a man of few words, said, "Do what you want to, but I'd like to see you finish." On the way back to school, Fred made a decision, to not quit. In 1966, he graduated from college with a degree in business. Finally,

he was ready to do what he knew was in his heart. Oh, he had several business opportunities, and inquiries from petroleum and manufacturing companies, but he didn't even take the first interview. He packed his bags because he knew where he belonged: Rossman Apiaries in Moultrie Georgia. And he has never regretted his decision, not for even one second.

When Fred arrived home from college he was ready to go to work. He quickly established himself as the field man. Fred liked having his hands full, of bees, that is. He tended the colonies, ran the crews, shook packages, drove the trucks, caged queens, fed bees and anything else that needed doing. His younger brother, Philip, also came to work for the family business after completing a degree in Agricultural Administration. Philip worked almost 20 years until Multiple Sclerosis finally forced him to take medical disability in 1987. Fred still raves about how Philip was great at queen rearing and



*Rossman nuc yard.*





Rossman packages ready to be shipped.

the business end of things, especially public relations.

When Fred joined his father, the bee business was booming. While keeping bees has never been without effort, it was certainly a heck of a lot easier then than it is today. Borders were open and package bee exportations were off the chart. There were no varroa mites (and their associated viruses), no tracheal mites, no small hive beetles, no Africanized bees, no chalkbrood, and no European Foulbrood.

From 1960 through the mid-1980s, Rossman's sold 15,000 to 16,000 packages per year, mostly to Canada. Semi-trucks would drive down from Canada, pick up 2,300 packages at a time and haul them



Feeding cans.

back north. The most notable difference between then and now was that two-pound packages were the staple, not the three-pound ones that we're familiar with today. Northern customers preferred the two-pounders because, at less cost, they could build up just as fast as a three-pounder as long as they were installed by the first part of April. Fred reminded me that during those "golden years," the bees had more forage, less disease, and no mites to contend with. During that time over 90% of Rossman's package orders went to Canada; this, however, was all about to change.

March 12<sup>th</sup>, 1986 was a bad day for the queen and package producers in the southeast, especially for the Rossman's. Fred said that he will never forget when he heard the news that the Canadian government closed the eastern border to southern U.S. bee imports in a desperate, yet unsuccessful, effort to stop the onslaught of tracheal mite infestation. "There had been reports but I never expected the shut down to occur at the beginning of the season" he said. One day the boarders were open, the next day closed. A regular Canadian customer of Rossman's had a truck en route to Moultrie at the time, expecting to pick up a load of packages, but, as soon as the news hit, they were diverted to California, which had not yet been included in the ban.

Within a short spell of the border shutdown, Rossman Apiaries' was on the verge of bankruptcy! Fred was trying desperately to keep the business running. He auctioned off land, cows, and anything he could to keep the doors open. He had to cut the work force down to a bare minimum because there wasn't any orders, hence any business. And, to make matters worse, other bee producers, who were in the same boat, were now all competing for the U.S. market. There were too many producers with too many bees and too few customers. Unfortunately, several businesses didn't survive. Others turned to honey production and got out of the package business completely. Just a handful of the producers who experienced those hard times are left in Georgia.

Fortunately for Fred and his family, it didn't take too long for the clouds to part and the sun to shine. Fred was offered an opportunity to buy Forbes and Johnston, a cypress

bee supply company in Homerville, Georgia. He figured that, while the bee package business recovered, Rossman Apiaries could diversify into selling beekeeping supplies. While it didn't solve everything overnight, it definitely helped to turn the corner during a difficult time. They also began accepting pollination contracts, but eventually ceased doing so for two reasons: one, Fred hates to move bees, and, two, you can't do everything!

Fred told me that nothing makes him more tense than hauling around a truckload of bees (which I agree!). When everything works out, it's no big deal: you leave at 3 or 4 a.m., arrive at the location before sunup, unload the bees, and, presto, you have instant pollinators! But, unfortunately, it doesn't always work that way. Here in the south, and elsewhere where temperatures are too warm to keep colonies closed up during a move, a decision has to be made either to cover the colonies with large nets or not; Fred always opted for the latter. Only problem being, a truck breaks down in the middle of the night, and there's nobody willing or able to help you until late the next morning. Meanwhile, the truck is in the sun, and by first light little bee bodies start appearing at the entrances and taking flight. Then by the time the repair guy shows up and sees this enormous, black cloud of bees flying around, he quickly makes an about face, gets back in his truck, and speeds away . . . , which is not a good start to your day.

The second reason they stopped moving bees around was Fred realized that something had to go. "Too many irons in the fire!" he said. "We were running night and day: shaking bees, making deliveries, moving bees, taking orders, shipping out orders, caging queens, working in the shop, building equipment, and taking more orders." So, one day, he realized pollination would have to be someone else's job.

While talking with Fred, I asked, what are the biggest challenges you face running your business? After thinking about it for a minute or two, he said, "Well, Jennifer, I really can't think of anything. I may have to get back to you on that one." Then he told me about how much he enjoys what he does. "So, sure there are stumbling blocks, but one can al-

ways find a way around them when you're happy with what you do," he said. We were chatting about other things when he stopped and added, "I wouldn't necessarily say this is a challenge, but what concerns me from year to year is promising something and then making sure I can fulfill that promise."

Every year even before the first package is shaken, Rossman Apiaries is sold out of packages. This is a good thing for business, but it makes Fred nervous every season. "You are walking on faith because you don't have a clue what is going to take place from now to then," Fred explained. One thing is for sure; Fred is very conscientious about trying not to overbook. He knows how many productive colonies are going into the winter and runs the percentages. Fortunately, in the past, there have been no major disasters. However, Fred does interject that their schedule is so tight that, once spring arrives, it only takes one day of rain, cold weather, the crew being sick, or the trucks breaking down for the entire year to be out of kilter. It's like a domino effect. Then, you realize that most of your packages were ordered five months ago. "The customers are relying on you to fulfill that promise," he continued, "If you can't satisfy the order, then, more than likely, the customers won't be able to find bees anywhere else because everyone has been sold out for months." Ouch!

Another concern of Fred's is making sure his customers are satisfied. "To be honest, it bothers me if I have sold someone something, and they aren't happy with it. But, sometimes customers won't or don't say anything. So, how are you supposed to know? I guess that, as long as you're honest with your customers, your goal is met," he said.

As stated, Fred definitely tries not to overload his plate. To avoid this, he relies heavily on his wife, Ann Rossman. "Scheduling the queen and package pickups are the most important aspect of this company," he noted, "So, I let someone more qualified than I handle it." Ann is not only in charge of the office, but she also attends most of the bee meetings and manages payroll. This is quite a lot to handle, but handle it she does! "She's the backbone of this company," Fred clarified. What is that saying . . . behind every great man,



*The other kind of packages that get shipped from Rossman Apiaries.*

there's an even greater woman? Well, Ann is that; you'll never meet a finer Southern lady.

When I visited Rossman Apiaries this Fall, Fred took me around and introduced me to his crew. They were in the wood shop sawing, cutting out equipment, and putting together orders in boxes of all sizes to be shipped. They were also coming in from the beeyards and in the office taking orders. It is quite the operation, and they have a great crew. "You're only as good as the people you hire," Fred continued, "A lot of people over the decades have worked very hard making this business successful."

If you've ever met Fred, probably while manning his booth at a bee meeting, then you know what a

solid man he is. Things could be going crazy all around him and he would just smile, shrug his shoulders and get to work. He told me once that worrying about something doesn't do a bit of good. He said, "Yes, you need to be concerned when it matters, but sitting around worrying about something is a waste of time." He then quoted one of his favorite life mottos, "Worrying is like a rocking chair; it gives you plenty of work to do, but it will never get you anywhere." Amen!

Today, Rossman Apiaries sell from 9,000 to 10,000 honey bee packages, as well as 10,000 queens, per year. The wooden ware they build is made out of cypress. Since the acquisition of Forbes & Johnston, Fred has continued to work with cypress because it's a better wood for bee hives. It's insect resistant, hardy, and easy to work with.

Ann and Fred have three children: Amanda, Scott and David. Amanda's husband Clint works for Fred. Their two boys are entrenched in jobs outside of beekeeping: banking and construction. Fred doubts they'll ever come home to Moultrie to carry on the business, which is fine. He also jokes from time to time about selling his business. I hope this never happens, at least while I'm still a beekeeper. **BC**

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