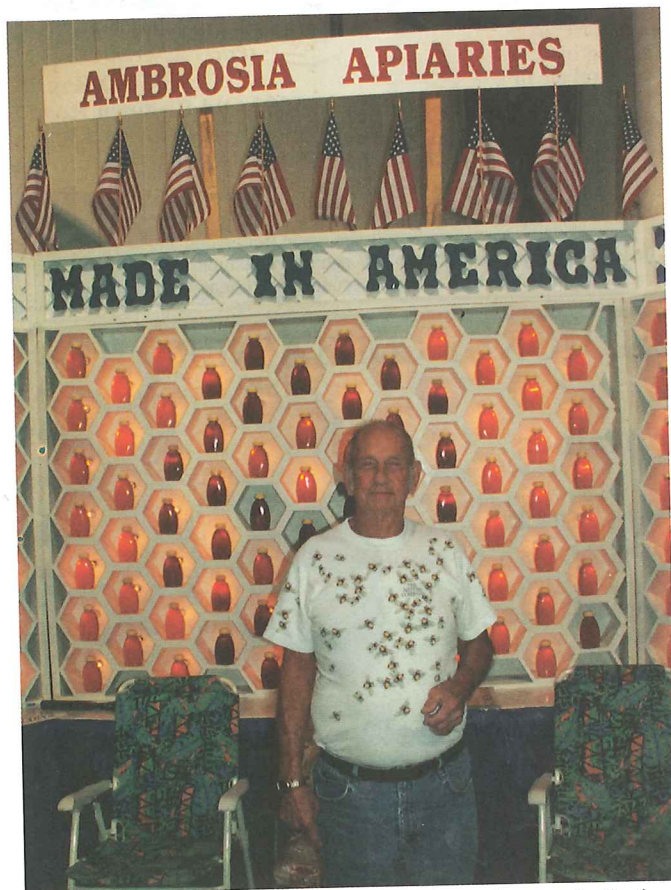


Jessie McCurdy – A Georgia Institution

Jennifer Berry



Jessie McCurdy proudly stands by his honey bee comb display at the Georgia National State Fair.

This past Summer Dan Harris (our lab technician) and I traveled to Perry, Georgia to relocate some colonies. We were in search of a Summer nectar flow. We had 40 colonies with newly installed packages on wax foundation. The bees needed a flow in order to draw out the comb and hopefully store enough honey to survive over Winter. Unfortunately, in Athens, the nectar flow usually shuts down by the end of Spring. Except for a few gardens here and several flowers there, the bees can't find a drop of nectar for the remainder of the year. However, just three hours to our south it's a whole different ballgame. Summer time in South Georgia offers a bounty of nectar and pollen from fields planted with a variety of crops. From horizon to horizon, laid out in a patch work of green carpet, you have cotton, cantaloupe, peanuts, watermelon, squash, soybeans and a variety of other crops just begging for bees.

But not any ole' field would do, so we asked our friend Jessie McCurdy for help. His bees have been pollinating

crops in the Perry area for decades. He knows the farmers, fields, and when and where to expect a flow. He knows which cotton fields are fixin' to bloom, or which cantaloupe field isn't worth putting bees on (because they didn't irrigate). Within a few hours our bees were sitting on the edge of a cotton field that bees dream about; for as far as you could see, cotton blossoms in all directions.

Since Jessie came to our rescue, it was our turn to return the favor. We drove over to an apiary of his which was located next to a cantaloupe field. He wanted to pull some honey. No problem, we thought until we saw his colonies. Jessie doesn't use mediums or shallows for honey supers. Oh no, he likes to super his colonies with deeps. These were the heaviest supers I've ever encountered. Dan and I were struggling with one super when Jessie sprints past us with his own deep super. He picked up those supers like they weighed no more than a quart of honey and slung them onto the back of the pickup like they were pillows. Did I mention he just turned 76?

Jessie became a beekeeper when he was 10 years old. He didn't come from a long line of beekeepers like some. Neither his grandfather nor uncle showed him the ropes. No brother or father encouraged his interest. Nope, Jessie was the first McCurdy to mess with bees and it came purely by accident. One day Jessie noticed a neighbor's pine tree had bees flying in and out of a small hole. Wanting to harvest the honey, he asked permission to cut it down. It took him two weeks to finally chop down and split open that tree. He couldn't wait for that delicious, first taste of raw honey that he himself removed. However, the great expectation of his sweet reward was not granted. The honey he extracted from the tree tasted like turpentine, but he ate it anyway, all by himself. "I worked too hard to let it go to waste," Jessie explained. He made a box for his new pets which survived for years. Hence his beekeeping days began and he's been playing with them ever since. That was 66 years ago.

Jessie grew up in Albany Georgia, just off of Lonesome Road. For all you Yankees up there, that's southeast of Columbus and about half way between Atlanta and Tallahassee. It's just north of Putney and south of Leesburg. You can't miss it. However, I guarantee if you are not from South Georgia you will mispronounce the name. Trust me Albany, New York is pronounced differently than Albany, Georgia. Just ask anyone who lives there.

Throughout his youth, Jessie kept bees and made a little money here and there selling honey. But it was only a hobby and not a way of life. After high school Jessie joined the Navy. Four years later he decided to join civilian life and went to Americus to attend trade school. That's where he met his wife Hazel.

After they were married they moved to Perry, Georgia



Jessie explaining the wonders of the hive to kids and moms alike.

were they still reside today. He became an electrician by trade and started his own TV and radio repair business. Jessie and his wife Hazel had three boys and one girl, none of whom followed their daddy's passion for bees. In 1974 he went to work for Pap's Brewing Company. "It was a very nerve wracking job, but when I came home, I would go out and work the bees. Their humming would relax and calm me. I would feel closer to nature and God. It also helped me renew my faith in man kind".

Fifteen years later at the age of 58, Jessie found himself out of work due to the company downsizing. Jessie explained that it was difficult for him to find a job. "Companies didn't want to hire someone who was technically so close to retirement" he said. Jessie decided it was time to expand his honey bee hobby into a full time business. He quickly increased the number of hives and eventually maxed out at 800 colonies. He figured with all the agriculture in the area, pollination was a sure thing. He drove from field to field talking to farmers about the benefits of pollination by bees. The first crop his bees pollinated was apples. He charged only \$8.00 per hive. After a few years his services were in such high demand he had to conscript the help from other beekeepers.

But making ends meet as a beekeeper wasn't easy. So, Jessie honed in on his wood working skills and began building his own equipment; something he still does today. When ever he spies a dead pine tree in the area, Jessie has it cut down, and sawn into boards. Then with his numerous saws and tools, he sculpts these boards into boxes, frames, lids, bottom boards, and whatever else comes to his mind. But not a shred of wood is ever wasted. Even the saw dust is used as mulch on their flower beds and gardens.

Pollination is still a major part of Jessie's business but more recently he has started selling specialty honeys. In the Perry area his bees collect wildflower, cantaloupe, Paulownia, and cotton. To his south they collect Tupelo, and orange blossom and to his north Sourwood.

He said "he was tired of hearing people saying all honey tastes alike." They've just never tried the different kinds" he explained.

Jessie still sells honey out of his house, but his biggest market is the Georgia National Fair. He and his wife have been a permanent fixture at the national fair for 18 years and plan on being there another 18; "if the good Lord allows", he says.

Jessie, Hazel and their son Chip are at the fair from sunup to sundown, every day for 14 days; not including the two weeks it takes to set up and tear down. They love being a part of the fair but it is hard work. Years ago, Jessie built a display (pictured) to reveal how honey comes in a variety of different colors. It is a huge crowd pleaser. He also sets out samples of wildflower, orange blossom, Tupelo and Sourwood for people to taste. "They are always amazed at the differences between them" Jessie said. Not only do they sell honey, they educate people about the little girls that produce it. There is an observation hive for people to explore, displays and brochures about Africanized bees, and CCD and even information on how to become a beekeeper. He wants the public to be aware of how important honey bees are and to understand how different our food source would be without them.

Jessie says he is nervous about the future of bees. I expressed to him how hard it must have been the year *Varroa* arrived and he explained "that was nothing compared to this year." To start, the drought kept numerous wildflowers from blooming. If crops were not irrigated, they didn't have a chance of surviving. "It was the driest year I've ever experienced" he said. Next he explained how the wildfires which burned out of control for weeks kept a blanket of smoke over much of south and central Georgia. "Some days the smoke was so thick the bees couldn't fly." Days of nectar foraging were lost due to the bee's inability to forage. Farmers started to complain about crooked vegetables and low yields. Then to top it off, he told me how the small hive beetle populations have ex-



Jessie in the field.

Jessie pointing out newly defoliated cotton fields.



ploded. Since the area around Perry has such a high volume of cantaloupe and watermelon fields, small hive beetles thrive. By the end of Summer colonies were dropping like flies all over South Georgia. Some beekeepers reported losses up to 90% from beetles. Jessie explained that this has been by far his worst year. "The mites are hard enough to deal with, but add beetles and boy it's hard to keep bees" he said.

Jessie and Hazel own and operate Ambrosia Apiaries. I've known Jessie and Hazel for almost 10 years now. They have both been extremely helpful whenever the lab or I have asked for help. They have also done a tremendous service for the beekeeping industry here in the state of Georgia. Not only with the exposure beekeeping receives at the fair (The Georgia National Fair committee expected over 450,000 visitors this year), but also their work with local schools, clubs and organizations. That's a right many folk that's been exposed to the wonders of honey bees over the years. Thank you Jessie and Hazel!

A quick note about Winter colony management in the south.

This year our southern bees have really been put through the wringer and it looks as if they're not out of the woods yet. According to meteorologists, if current predictions are correct, the southeast will experience an exceptionally dry Winter. This means bad news for our spring nectar flows. Here in Georgia, the bees are still flying on occasion which means

they are consuming honey faster than they should. You will need to check your bees often to make sure they have plenty of food. If it doesn't rain, the red maple flow may be severely hampered. Pollen patties are a great remedy for poor pollen collection. I usually mix fresh pollen, brood builder (half and half) and honey to make a hamburger size patty. We've noticed some of our colonies collected plenty of goldenrod pollen, but other sites have very little. We will definitely be feeding pollen patties by the end of January. Another thing, plenty of

creeks and ponds dried up this year meaning water sources are becoming scarce. In the past, we've never had to worry about this. Not any more. Make sure your bees have access to water. Even during the Winter months bees need water. Take care of those little girls, they've had it rough.

Hope your bees are merry and your Christmas white. See ya! **BC**

Jennifer Berry conducts honey bee research at the University of Georgia bee lab in Athens, Georgia. She is a frequent contributor to these pages.