



UN-STUNG heroes

by Judi Burton

The buzzing drone of a thousand bees swarming a hive often causes stiffened backs and clenched jaws. For those severely allergic to honeybees, it can be a deafening sound, both frightening and dreaded. But the thought of never hearing this in nature again is far more chilling. Sadly, that possibility is more real than ever before. Honeybees in America are becoming extinct. If you are sipping on a beverage or nibbling on a snack at this moment, chances are a honeybee had something to do with the making of that product. No one knows why they are disappearing at such an alarming rate, but Henry Culberson of Pawleys Island's Henry's Honey has a few guesses.

Henry is what we should call an "un-stung hero." On his two acres, he has decided to help repopulate the diminishing honeybees here on the Grand Strand. As I drove up his gravel driveway, vines and banana tree leaves arched and curled, hiding his tree house-like cottage. A tall, slim woman in a long, colorful dress with silver hair and shining blue eyes greeted me from her second-story porch. She introduced herself as Susan Culberson, Henry's wife, pointed to a smoky area beyond the live oaks and palm trees and said, "He's over there, making wine." I walked toward a large fire

pit where the smell of cedar wafted across a humongous garden with a solar tower in the middle of it. Hawaii or Costa Rica came to mind as I stared across the pepper plants and orange trees. A large screened-in shelter held several men looking on as a tanned, also silver-haired, small yet muscular man churned a huge tub of muscadine grapes. He looked up and greeted me as I sat down at the picnic table. He continued to lecture on the process of wine making for a while, and offered



me a glass of last year's batch. It was sweet and thick, much like a port wine.

We walked around his property as he pointed out his navel oranges, sweet potato crops and mandarin trees. The white honeybee boxes were spread across the edges of his property, tucked back in coves of wild bushes and looming trees. He explained that many of the honeybees that are suc-

cessful in America are actually foreign colonies from Russia or Italy. An organization called the Russian Queen Breeders Association imported Russian bees to an island off the gulf coast of Louisiana about 10 years ago. They quarantined them, and all they do is breed queen bees. "You have to know someone within the organization to get a Russian," Henry said. We spoke a bit on pesticide, and while he did not come right out and say it, he was hinting at the possibility of our bees disappearing because of the amount of pesticide used on our crops. "The old Southern grandmas used to throw their dish soap on their plants to keep the bugs off," Henry said, smiling. "I use a spray bottle with Dawn dish soap and water, and I do pretty good."

As we walked under grape arbors and through crops of field peas, he spoke of the honeybee industry and how it's changed so dramatically in the last 50 years. "Now, the amount of beekeepers has dropped by about 80 to 90 percent. Where there once was a beekeeper for every farm, now they put the hives on tractor-trailers and take them to the blueberry fields, grape fields, orange groves and so on. It used to be that there were only a hundred or so hives for a farm, and now each beekeeper has five to 10 thousand hives," Henry explained. "That stresses them out." Honeybees are seasonal creatures, and when they're in a Mack Truck for half their lives, they might have a hard time keeping their natural calendars. "If you were a beekeeper 30 years ago, fell asleep like Rip Van Winkle and woke up today, you wouldn't even recognize beekeeping."

We arrived back at the house and donned white suits and netted hats. The material was thick like canvas. "Bees hate black and wool fabric. Maybe it reminds them of bears," he said with a laugh. We each chugged a large glass of ice water before heading out to the hives, because the suits get very hot and it's easy to get overheated, especially in the dog days of summer. I was a bit nervous as we made our way to the first hive, as I have held a great record since the age of 12 of not getting stung. He explained that

bees have their own air traffic control. Those going in, fly from above, while those going out, exit from the bottom. They take turns bringing in pollen, nectar and water. Henry had his smoker in hand and pumped it gently into the hive. The smoker sedates the bees to make opening the hive easier. He pulled one of the combs out for me to see. Each cell was either filled with honey or bee bread. Unlike the amber honey, the bee bread looks like yellow cotton balls, and is food for the bees, not people. The queen was easy to spot with her bright blue dot on her back.

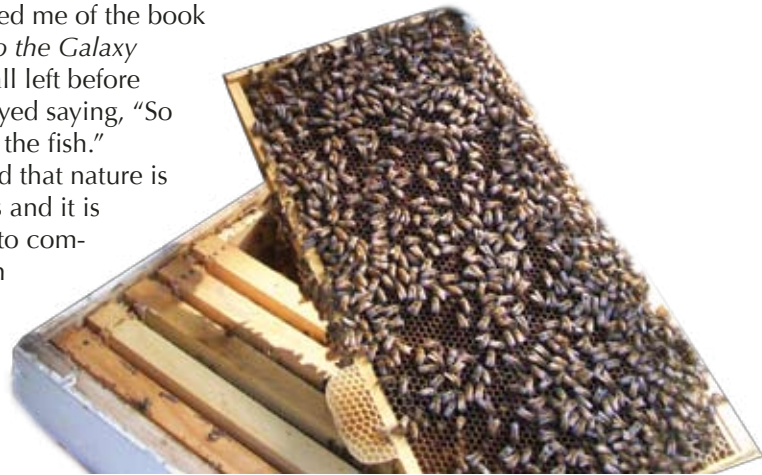
As Henry worked away at killing hive beetles, I stood quietly listening to the colony. The sound would normally send me running, but shielded by the suit, I was suddenly aware of the relaxing quality of the sound. Several bees alighted on my hands as I clicked away with my camera, realizing this was the first time I'd ever been able to study a bee so closely. The buzzing was almost euphoric, and pleasantly different from the annoying sound of a fly whizzing past your ear.

Afterward, we sat down and chewed on the freshest honeycomb I have ever tasted, and talked about bees and the environment. Henry associates bees with the canaries in the coal mines. "They bring canaries in cages into the coal mines, because the canaries die first if there is bad air. I think it's the same with the bees. They're trying to tell us something about the condition of the natural environment, and we don't want to believe it so we go looking for phantom diseases and parasites." It reminded me of the book *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* when the dolphins all left before the Earth was destroyed saying, "So long, and thanks for the fish."

Henry suggested that nature is warning the humans and it is hard for some of us to comprehend. The human race is supposedly the smartest, yet we continue to ignore the signs of trouble ahead. A dark path looms be-

fore us if we do not wake up from our complacent slumber and start righting the wrongs we have done not just to nature but to ourselves. What would the world be like without honeybees?

Henry Culberson sells his local raw honey at Ebb and Flow Art Co-op in Murrells Inlet.





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