

"Tell the story of the mountain you climbed. Your words could become a page in someone else's survival guide."

— Morgan Harper Nichols

I don't know how it has been at your house, but around here, this year has flown by. That's fine with me because 2021 has, in many ways, been 2020 Part Two. Yikes... next year is literally Twenty Twenty Two! Are we ready?

I checked the calendar and we are now in November. Our bees should be mite-free, our hives should have mouse guards installed and they should be heavy with honey stores. All the girls should be tucked away for the winter (the boys are dead) and if everything has been done properly, they shouldn't need any attention until next March. "If" and "shouldn't." That doesn't mean they won't need some help, but that needn't be the plan.

Thanksgiving is at the end of this month. This is a time to reflect on the blessings that have been poured on each of us. As beekeepers, many of us can probably point to someone who has helped us along the way, someone who has blessed us with their time, their encouragement and their knowledge in our journey. Have you thanked them? Have you honored their gift by paying it forward to someone else?

My personal beekeeping journey has been marked by many people through the years who have shown me kindness and support. There have also been wretched, dark-hearted people who would have preferred to see me eat worms and die, but life is full of those potential stumbling blocks and a happy life is one that steers around those people without giving them a second thought. They are living in the life they have created for themselves; we live in the one we choose for us.

Unlike many people, my grandpa or grandma didn't keep bees, nor did my aunts or uncles. My first introduction to beekeeping, of sorts, was through my dear friend Cyrus Green. Cyrus was about as old as dirt and had the wisdom, patience and compassion that often



The author and his biggest supporter, his daughter Martha, on the day they became beekeepers. Eleven in this photo, she now is all grown up and teaching high school math in South Carolina. But she still gives encouragement to her father, and still loves his bees' honey.

goes along with that. He had been a county Ag agent in his younger days so I would often ask him about problems with my garden or animals. In the late 90's, I complained to him about how my squash and cucumber plants never gave me much produce, and he said, "That's because there aren't any bees. The feral honey bees have been killed off by a new mite. You should get some bees. I keep some at my place in the mountains; come up there with me some time and I'll show them to you."

At that point in my journey, all I knew about honey bees was that they lived in white boxes and they have stingers at one end, which they use with willful abandon. I begged off the offer to attend a hive inspection. And all too soon, Cyrus passed away. But a tiny seed had been planted.

The notion of beekeeping next knocked on my door in 2005. There was an article in the [North Carolina Agricultural Review](#) about a give-away program being conducted by NCSU and the NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. Five hundred hives, complete with bees, were going to be given to 250 people across the state (two hives each). I didn't know much about beekeeping but I knew that two fully-outfitted hives were worth a nice bit of money. I still didn't want to get stung, but if I didn't die, would free bees be worth it? I braced myself and applied for the grant.

The give-away program was very cleverly designed. Applications had to be submitted early in the year, but winners wouldn't be announced until spring. In the meantime, applicants were expected to join a local beekeeping association and get some bee-learning under their belts. They were also encouraged to be prepared if they didn't win a grant.

About 3,000 people applied for those 250 free-bee grants. I did not get one. But by that time, I had convinced myself that I could do this. All I had to do was close my eyes and go for it. I was able to quickly buy my own bees and equipment and I became a beekeeper.

My eleven-year-old daughter Martha was my biggest motivator. She thought beekeeping was really neat (and still does). She joined me as we installed my first bees and frequently helped on subsequent inspections. She even travelled with me through the years as we attended bee conferences across the state and the country. She was often the darling of bee conferences, the only young face among a sea of wrinkled old people, and would get special attention from the professors and other instructors at the conferences. People like Larry Connor and Jim Tew surely don't remember meeting me but no doubt they remember Martha.

Martha and I went to the Heartland Apicultural Society annual meeting one summer in Oberlin, Ohio. We stayed at a hotel a little north of there, in Lorain, on Lake Erie. Getting breakfast at Waffle House on Saturday, the waitress asked, "Are you two going to the amusement park today?"

"No," Martha said cheerfully. "We're going to a bee conference!" I had failed to mention to her that Lorain, Ohio, is the home of Cedar Point Amusement Park, which at that time had the world's tallest roller coaster. Instead of riding on a boring roller coaster that day, she got to learn how to perform instrumental insemination of a queen bee.

While not active in the bee yard, my oldest daughter, Rachel, has also always supported me in her own way. I felt greatly honored when she took Dr. Tarp's *Intro to Beekeeping* class while

at NC State and got an "A". Then she allowed me to furnish 2-ounce honey favors to 250 of her closest friends at her wedding. More recently, she asked me to bring an observation hive and help with my grandbaby's bee-themed birthday party ("*Our sweet honey bee is turning three!*").

My wife is another important reason that I am a beekeeper. By the time I found out that I wasn't getting free bees, package bees were in short supply. But I was able to buy two packages from Texas. Did I mention that I didn't know much about bees at that point? Those bees were the spawn of Satan. After doing several inspections and being stung over a dozen times each time, I told her that I could not understand why people would want to do this. I was ready to throw in the towel. I was not having any fun at all. She said, "Well, before you do that, is there anything you can do that might make it better?"

I said, "I don't know. They say you can replace the queens and that may help." She encouraged me to do that, and even went to Jack Tapp's bee yard while I was at work and bought two new queens for me. Bingo, that did the trick. My new queens made nice, sweet bees and I restarted my enjoyment of beekeeping.

I must also thank our state bee inspectors for their patience and encouragement. Starting out, Will Hicks and Don Hopkins were frequent attenders of my county bee association meetings and I took full advantage of the opportunity to pick their brains. I learned a lot about compassion for others in the way they would answer my dumb questions. Someone could say, "I saw such-and-such on You-Tube. Should I do that?" Instead of replying, "That is the most lame-brained thing I've ever heard of! Are you a moron?", they would say, "Well, I suppose you could do that. But maybe you'd have better luck if you would do this"

Lewis Cauble also deserves special thanks for me being the beekeeper I am today. After beekeeping for a couple of years and enthusiastically volunteering within my local bee club, one of those dark-hearted people I

mentioned earlier cruelly and publicly chopped my enthusiasm off at the knees. I divorced myself from that group for a couple of years; the Bible teaches us the folly of casting pearls before swine. During that intermission, Lewis had taken up beekeeping and had filled the management void that had arisen at my former bee club. He phoned me one day and personally invited me to come to the next meeting, saying that they need people like me. I went, and since then not only have I formed a strong friendship with Lewis but have become what can only be described as a very solid supporter of that club.

I hope I have done at least a small part in paying those kindnesses forward. One example I love to share involves two women who attended my club's bee school. They approached me at a club meeting and said, "Mr. Austin, can we please come to your house sometime and have you show us your bees?" What could I say? We arranged a time and had a wonderful afternoon in the bee yard. They continued learning, asking questions, asking me to visit their bee yards, and so on. Then the day came when they both were awarded their Master Beekeeper certifications from NCSBA.

My small part in encouraging them multiplied into great things that they have now done for others as chapter president, chapter secretary, chapter outreach director, NCSBA 4-H Coordinator, NCSBA Master Beekeeper Committee members and other things too many to list. Chris Apple and Cynthia Speed have grown our club and the state association in numbers and quality. I'm very glad to have played a small role in getting them off on the right foot.

If you keep bees, and especially if you keep them successfully, there surely must be



The author and Master Beekeeper Cynthia Speed participate in a local radio feature about beekeeping. Mentoring others can result in lifelong friendships as well as multiplying what you've shared as those you've nurtured share with others. Photo: John Rintoul

someone who has given you guidance along the way. Perhaps that person is an author in the pages of a beekeeping magazine. Or maybe somebody has given you encouragement at just the right time. Thanksgiving is the perfect time to reflect on those gifts, not to mention the greatest gift of all. With respect to beekeeping, let's consciously plan to pay those little kindnesses forward, especially going into Twenty Twenty Two! You may never know how much of a difference you've made.

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