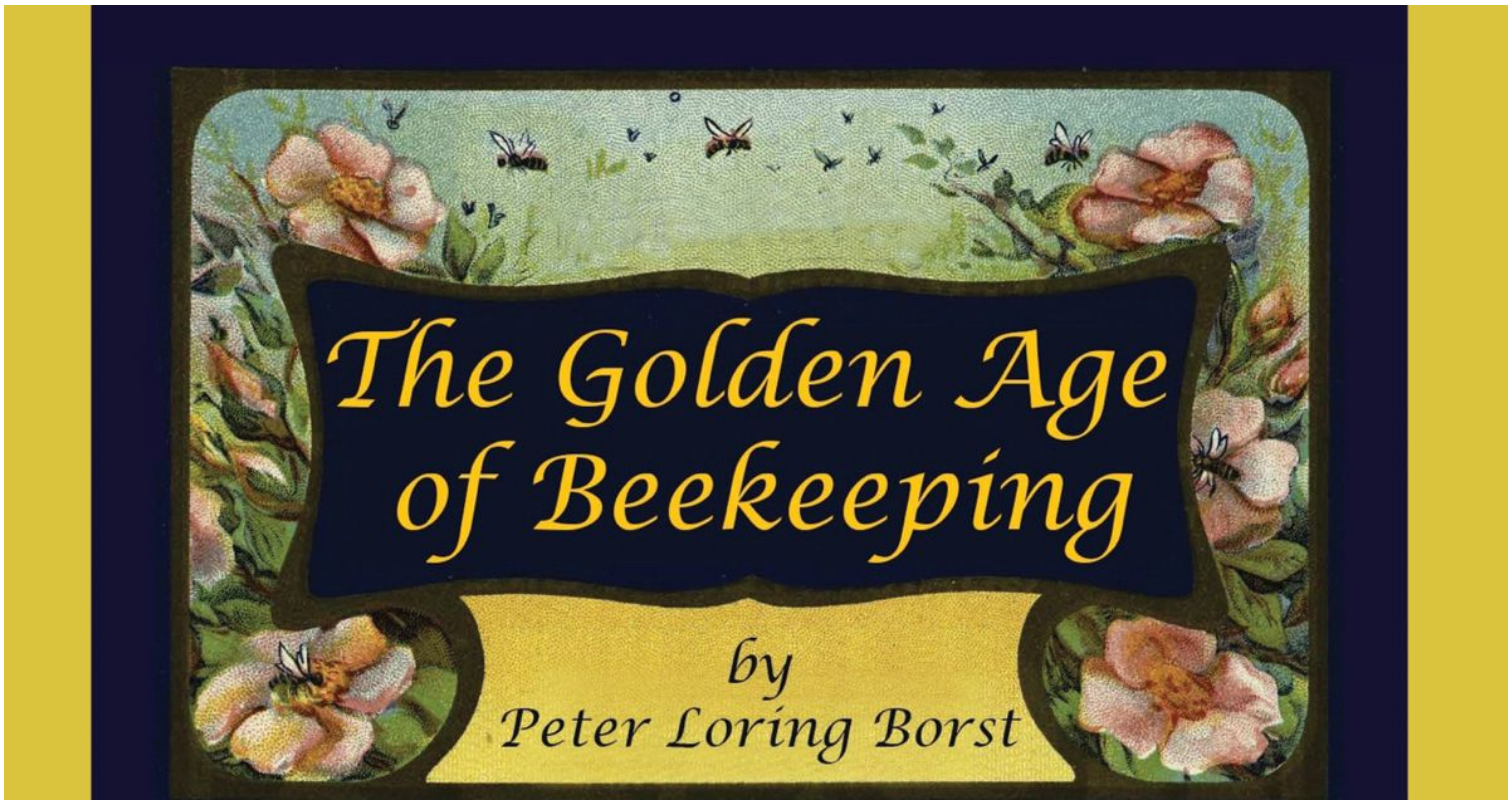
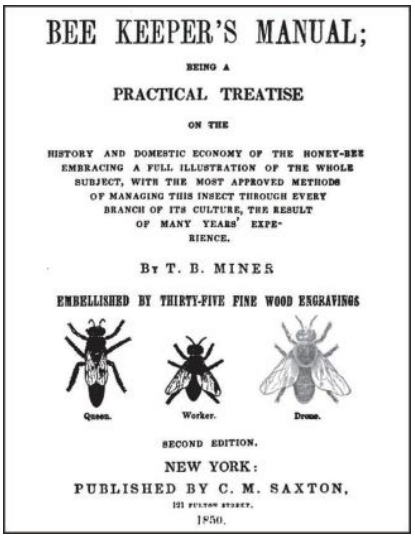


When I first got the idea to write this story, I was intending to call it the "History of Beekeeping in New York." But my wife, who is perhaps more realistic than I, stated that such a book would be of interest to about fifty bald guys with beards. This took most of the wind out of my sails, but a new gust blew through and I decided to affix a new title, which she thought a great improvement. The truth is, the Golden Age of Beekeeping did take place largely in New York State. The reasons for this are many, but among them include the vast areas planted to clover and buckwheat and the huge population centers in and around New York City. Yet, more than that, it was many ingenious and forward looking New Yorkers who took beekeeping from a quaint cottage industry and built it into a profitable enterprise. For the sake of comparison, let's look quickly at some figures. In 1860, New York produced 2.5 million pounds of honey, and 138 thousand pounds of beeswax. In 2011, the honey production in NY was almost the same, 2.8 million pounds. But bear in mind, in 1860 this was all done with man power and horse drawn carriages. Produce was shipped downstate via barges.

But I am getting ahead of myself. The story really begins in New York City. The island of Manhattan was a garden paradise at first, with a small city and farming close by. It grew to be one of the biggest cities in the world by the 1800s. As the city spread, agriculture was pushed out, but never too far, as the costs of transporting goods would always eat into the price. In the early 19th century, across the rivers, were areas that kept their rural character. Long Island in particular, was well situated to grow crops for the appetites of city dwellers. Within eyesight of Manhattan, in what is now known as Astoria, Queens, there was an American beekeeping pioneer by the name of Thomas Miner. He lived in the neighborhood called Ravenswood, and began writing about bees for the *American Agriculturist* in 1846. His first entry, "Management of Honey Bees", begins:

> The art of managing bees in this country is but very imperfectly understood, so far as profit, health, and productiveness are concerned. It is generally supposed that bees require little or no air, and if they prove unproductive, or are lost from the ravages of the bee-moth, it is a matter of chance, wholly beyond the control of the owner. I now propose giving the result of my own experience in the management of bees for some years, on Long Island … I think my remarks will not prove wholly void of interest.


BEE KEEPER'S MANUAL;

BEING A

PRACTICAL TREATISE

ON THE

HISTORY AND DOMESTIC ECONOMY OF THE HONEY-BEE EMBRACING A FULL ILLUSTRATION OF THE WHOLE SUBJECT, WITH THE MOST APPROVED METHODS OF MANAGING THIS INSECT THROUGH EVERY BRANCH OF ITS CULTURE, THE RESULT OF MANY YEARS' EXPERIENCE.

By T. B. MINER

EMBELLISHED BY THIRTY-FIVE FINE WOOD ENGRAVINGS

Queen. Worker. Drone.

SECOND EDITION.

NEW YORK:

PUBLISHED BY C. M. SAXTON,

121 FULTON STREET.

1850.

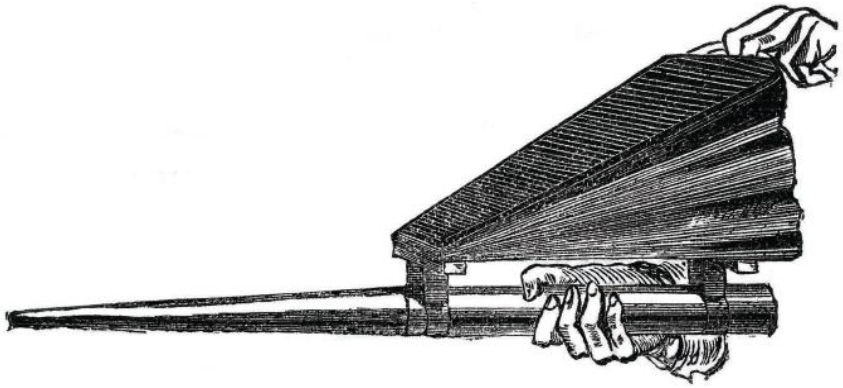
The first major book on beekeeping published in the US

New York City Beginnings

And so we begin the long and intricate story of beekeeping in New York. I am afraid it will involve an excessive number of bald guys with beards. Not too many women figure into the tale. However, my friend Tammy Horn has written a great book on women beekeepers, called *Beeconomy*. Women play a very important role in today's beekeeping world, especially research. But in the 1800s, it was mostly a guy thing. Miner wrote for the magazines for several years and traveled upstate to visit beekeepers there. At some point he realized that if he were to make a profitable living from bees, he would have to leave Long Island for the Upstate region. He wrote in his column:

> I would observe, that in different parts of the country, the labors of bees vary according to the bee-pasturage about them. In a location where the white clover (*Trifolium repem*) abounds profusely, as in Herkimer county, State of New York, and some other great grazing counties, a swarm will produce much more honey and wax, than on Long Island, where the honey harvest is not so abundant.

Then, he moved Upstate. Miner settled in Utica, which is about fifteen miles from Herkimer. He never really prospered as a beekeeper, but continued to write and started several journals. His "Northern



Quinby Smoker

Farmer" began in 1852, and was devoted to the topics of Agriculture, Horticulture, Floriculture, Bees, and -- Poultry, another great interest of his. In fact, he seemed fascinated by the varieties of domestic fowl. He published "The Rural American" which didn't do as well as he would have liked, and experimented extensively with breeding varieties of fruit such as grapes and strawberries. He eventually retired to the town of Linden, New Jersey, where he died in 1878. His name is little remembered among beekeeping enthusiasts, but his work was surely ahead of his time.

Mysteries of Beekeeping Explained

The name that is more well known, of course, is Moses Quinby. He was also born downstate and moved up to St. Johnsville, which is also about 15 miles from Herkimer, though in the opposite direction from Utica. Quinby was the first to successfully increase his holdings into the hundreds of hives. In 1853, he wrote the next great American book on bees, which he called: "Mysteries of Beekeeping Explained." The full title reads:

> Mysteries of Beekeeping Explained being a complete analysis of the whole subject. The natural history of bees, directions for obtaining the greatest amount of pure surplus honey with the least possible expense, remedies for losses given, and the science of "luck" fully illustrated – the result of more than twenty years of experience in extensive apiaries.

But Quinby is remembered mostly for his invention of the tool still in use today, the bee smoker. For centuries, it had been known that smoke pacifies bees, but the methods of application were never quite adequate to the job. When the bees are amiable, a few puffs from a Meerschaum might do, but there are times when billows of smoke are called for. The story goes that in 1873, Quinby really fixed his mind on the subject and came up with the idea of pairing a bellows to a can and the modern bee smoker was born.

Moses Quinby was born in the town of North Castle, near what is now White Plains, New York, but his family moved up the Hudson to Coxsackie when he was young. At eighteen he became interested in bees, and used money earned working at a sawmill to buy his first hive. He multiplied his holdings of box hives and began the practice of cutting a hole in the top of the box, in order to get bees to store honey in another box placed over the hole. This became the basis for adding "supers" or "supering" as beekeepers do it today. Prior to that, the bees were killed in order to take the honey. The improvement being, that the surplus honey could now be removed, leaving enough for the colony below to survive.

Moving to Greener Pastures

In 1853, Quinby and his wife moved Upstate and he began expanding in earnest. Even though he was quite successful producing honey in plain boxes, he immediately saw the advantage in Langstroth's invention of the moveable comb hive, where the combs were mounted in wood frames, giving complete control over the inner workings of the hive. This was followed by a series of advances including the centrifugal honey extractor, embossed beeswax sheets for starting combs (called foundation) and, of course, Quinby's own bee smoker.

New York State became the largest honey-producing region in the world. Moses Quinby was one of the foremost teachers, experimenters, and promoters of this beekeeping revolution. His influence spread and inspired other notable New Yorkers, such as Captain J. E. Hetherington who expanded his holdings to 3000 hives in the vicinity of Cherry Valley. Others included P. H. Elwood of Starkville, and L. C. Root. Quinby died at the age of 65, right in the middle of the Golden Age, which he helped bring about.

Lyman C. Root married Quinby's daughter and joined the business. They sold supplies and also made a handsome amount of money by buying up hundreds of traditional box hives and transferring them into frame hives for re-sale. When Quinby died, L. C. took over the business and also produced an updated version of "Quinby's New Beekeeping" in 1885. According to its editor, Root had so thoroughly rewritten the book that he had every right to call it his own, but chose to honor his mentor and father-in-law in the title. In his preface, he writes:

> We have long felt the need of a bee journal edited by a practical bee-keeper who would, in the broadest sense, publish it in the interest of scientific and practical apiculture; one that was in no way connected with a supply trade, and consequently free to speak of everything used by bee-keepers as the merits demand. We have had no such journal until the appearance

(l) W.L. Cogshall and sons, Brown and Archie, in his beeyard, 1897. (r) Part of W.L. Cogshall's beeyard, Genoa, 1908

of the "American Apiculturist" in May, 1883.

Beginnings of The New York State Beekeepers' Association

Both Mr. Quinby and Mr. Root were active in the New York State association, which continues today with the name of Empire State Honey Producers Association. Actually, it has had many different names, but was probably begun in 1868. They met in Utica, NY in 1870 with Quinby as president. Famous beekeepers in attendance included Capt. Hetherington, Van Douzen and L. C. Root. The minutes of the meeting were reported in the *American Bee Journal*.

The association held its 7th meeting 1877 at the Temperance Hotel in Syracuse. It was moved and carried that, "No member be allowed to speak more than twice, and not longer than five minutes at a time."

The annual convention was convened in 1885 in Syracuse, NY at the City Hall. Attendance was estimated at 200, including most of the prominent honey producers in the state. L. C. Root presided. He gave great importance to developing the honey market. His points included:

> Anything tending to educate in the direction of raising the quality of our honey to a higher standard is exactly in line with creating and strengthening a better market. Our first aim should be a prime quality, and a complete and perfect finish so that it shall be attractive and agreeable to handle. We need to guard and foster most strenuously the fact that our product is a pure and wholesome article of food.

These are essentially the same issues beekeepers of New York are dealing with today. Honey's reputation has been tarnished by a glut of cheap imported honey of marginal quality. New York has always produced a stellar product and the public is entitled to have it in its pure fresh form. Mr. Root was a successful beekeeper, producing 42 thousand pounds of honey from 400 colonies in 1886, while maintaining eleven acres of fruits and vegetables grown for market.

The Legendary Coggshall Family

As I mentioned, the State Association changed its name on a regular basis. In February of 1880, it met in Utica, NY under the name of North-Eastern Bee Keepers Association. The president was L. C. Root, residing in Mohawk. Among the beekeepers in attendance was one Mr. Coggshall, who reported producing 4200 pounds of extracted honey and another 900 pounds of "comb honey" which is honey comb sold in small wood boxes in which the bees have stored it. From these modest beginnings, Mr. Coggshall went on the become the biggest beekeeper in the world. In 1890, W. L. Coggshall claimed to own somewhere between 3000 and 3200 hives — "he does not know exactly how many." These were placed in fifteen different locations between Cayuga Lake and Skaneateles. The home base was in Groton, NY.

Scenes of the Coggshall method of extracting honey by hand.

Coggshall gave the greatest importance to location. He was situated at the center of the vast white clover and buckwheat region which stretched from Massachusetts to Ohio. It is hard to imagine now, as there are so few acres planted to these crops any more. Much of the land has reverted to forests, and what farmland remains consists mostly of corn, hay, and fruit trees. The clover was planted as forage for the huge dairy industry, and buckwheat was a food source favored by the immigrant populations who had become accustomed to it as a staple in the old countries.

W. L. Coggshall established his first out apiary in 1878, at a time when most of the beekeepers kept their hives at home. In each yard there would be a shed 12 x 16 feet which was large enough to hold the equipment needed for 80 to 100 colonies. Each shed would also contain a honey extractor, uncapping knifes, containers to catch the honey, and tin pails for water. Additionally, there would be a complete set of hammers and nails, screws and drivers, wire screens, a smoker with two spare bellows, long wisp brooms from brushing off bees, and a wheel barrow. The shed was not stocked with bee veils, as each beekeeper was expected to have his own.

In the Coggshall philosophy, the three factors needed for success in beekeeping depended on the quality of the location, the men, and the hives. Having an excellent location, he employed a unique group of men who could perform the hive manipulations according to his instructions. These methods were reported extensively in the bee journals of the time, so that few did not know of the Coggshall Method. There is an old saying among beekeepers that you must either work so slowly that the bees don't know you are there, or so quickly.

The Coggshall crew worked at a blazing pace; "lightning operators" was the term used by E. R. Root. The hives were quickly opened, often by yanking or even kicking the boxes apart. The honey frames were rapidly shaken with a studied trembling technique which dislodged most of the bees. These were handed off to the extracting crew which usually consisted

Residence of David H. Coggshall, West Groton, NY

(l) An outyard of W.L. Coggshall, showing tenement hive used. ***Photo by Verne Morton*** **(r) One of the outyards of W.L. Cogshall** ***Photo by Verne Morton***

of teenagers in a cramped shed, right there in the bee yard. These boys spun the honey from the frames and the fresh honey was run into wooden barrels. At the end of the day, the drums were loaded on to horse drawn wagons and taken back to the home base.

Farm Life in Groton, NY

We are indeed fortunate that Verne Morton was also residing in Groton at the time, for with his large format camera, he documented the daily life of farm families. Among the many sights that caught his interest were the comings and goings of the Coggshall family. Both W. T. Coggshall and his brother, David, appeared regularly in the pages of *Gleanings in Bee Culture*, one of the major magazines of the time. In fact, the glass negatives are safely preserved by the Tompkins County Historical Society, in Ithaca. It is much is easier to get a sense of what life was like by gazing at these scenes from over one hundred years ago. The Coggshall's built some of the nicest houses in the vicinity using the money from the sale of honey, and these houses still stand as a testament to that Golden Age.

W.L. Cogshall

One of the topics of the day, in the late 1800s, was how to successfully over-winter colonies of bees. When all of the hives were kept in the home yard, the usual practice was to move them into cellars. But some of Coggshall's bee yards were up to forty miles from home, and they were left to pass the winter on site. This inspired lots of novel plans, including the packing case.

Individual packing cases were built from wood and these would be placed over the hives. Enough space was allowed between the hive and the case to fill the cavity with straw, wood shavings, or other cheap insulating material. Some of these cases were large enough to hold eight colonies at once. Unfortunately, it was learned the hard way that too much insulation would tend to trap moisture inside and the bee colonies actually did worse with heavy packing. To this day, however, wintering in cold climates vexes beekeepers. One of the solutions to winter, of course, is to move south. Coggshalls did just that, establishing apiaries in warmer locations such as Arizona and Cuba.

Another Coggshall neighbor, Harry Howe, wrote for the bee journals and gave us a sense of how W. L. Coggshall thought. He tells us of riding along with his mentor, horse and buggy style, over the rough roads to the apiary and discussing the latest bee journal articles. The question that came up was often: "Is he a success, personally? Are the ideas advanced as the result of personal experiments, or are they mere theories evolved out of the reading of some other man's work?"

The final test, Harry tells us, is "Will it pay?" As an example of the calculation he would make, in those days it was common to hire someone to stay in each bee yard all day long, in order to catch any swarms that might emerge from the hives when the regular crew was elsewhere. Coggshall figured the money spent was wasted: "I could raise bees for fifty cents a colony; and suppose eight or ten swarms go, only five dollars is lost, and that would pay a man for only a half week's wages. No sir."

In 1899, Harry reported that on August 25, in the height of the buckwheat harvest, W. L. Coggshall was harvesting from 3000 to 5000 pounds of honey a day, in the vicinity of Ithaca, NY. Bear in mind, this was all done by hand, there were no motors nor electricity. Harry assures us that "both the Coggshalls make money at anything they undertake" and that W. L. (Lamar) sold 78 thousand pounds in 1897, his brother David produced somewhat less, but it amounted four to five carloads a year between the two of them.

By 1904, W. L. Coggshall had the reputation of being the world's largest honey producer. Tompkins County produced more honey than any other county in the state: 236,000 pounds. The Coggshall clan eventually moved to Florida, having had enough of the vexing New York State winters. (**To be continued**)

(l) This apiary was in the heart of Basswood country, north of Ithaca, NY (r) One of Coggshall's crews ready for a day's work in the out yards.