



by JAMIE ELLIS

Associate Professor of Entomology  
Honey Bee Research and Extension Lab  
Dept of Entomology and Nematology  
University of Florida  
[jellis@ufl.edu](mailto:jellis@ufl.edu)

# Introduction

*Introductions first: my name is Jamie and I am a beekeeper (sounds like a confession does it not☺). I have been one since I was 12 and that was 24 years ago. That puts me in my beekeeping “middle age”. In my time keeping bees, I have noticed that beekeepers wear their “years keeping bees” as badges of honor. It is something about which to be proud (if working with an insect that the ordinary person finds terrifying can bring pride – perhaps, then, we rather should consider our “years keeping bees” as an indicators of how crazy we actually are).*

**B**eekeeping is not really in my family. I do not have any close relatives who practice(d) the art. My maternal grandmother tells me that she had a crazy uncle who kept bees, the old school way. Apparently, he chased swarms beating pots – you know, the whole nine yards. But, I am not like him, I am a “normal” beekeeper, whatever that is.

My beekeeping adventures started when I was eight. Somehow, somehow, I became interested in bees and beekeeping. I cannot really identify the origins of my interest. I know there were a couple of introductions to bees that I remember vividly. First, someone passed out a document about honey bees to my kindergarten class. I did not think much about it at the time. The pamphlet found its way into the deep recesses of my toy box. Second, my great uncle allowed a beekeeper onto his property. His son would bring one frame of comb honey to our house yearly. I loved it. Third, there was a beekeeper close to my elementary school so I got to see honey bee colonies every day on the way to school. Fourth, I

clearly remember having a dream about keeping bees – really out of nowhere. I suspect all of these occurrences ultimately and cumulatively sparked my bee curiosity by the time I was eight.

Now the difficult task began. I had to convince my parents that I wanted to keep bees. Of course, my parents are part of the “normal” cohort of people who inhabit the earth – the majority of the population who maintain a healthy respect for honey bees. Besides, what eight-year-old wants to keep bees? So, my parents said “no”. I was clearly too young, too inexperienced, and the idea too foreign to my parents for them to allow me to keep bees.

Yet, I did not give up. The beekeeping pamphlet that found its way to the bottom of my toy box resurfaced. I noticed on the back that it said “for more information on honey bees and beekeeping, contact Dadant and Sons, Hahira, GA”. It even gave an address and a contact person for the office. I wrote the lady whose name was on the back and she sent me a huge envelop full of beekeeping literature. It contained, among

other things, a Dadant and Sons equipment catalogue and a copy of the *American Bee Journal*. I read this information over and over. It captivated me. I am sure many of you have had similar experiences.

Well, I did this for four years. I read everything I could about honey bees, about beekeeping, etc. I developed a business plan (I was going to get RICH making and selling honey) and even got my 10-year-old brother to sign a business contract with me. We would split the profits 50:50 as long as he helped me work my colonies, colonies I did not even have at the time.

By the time I was 12 and in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, I was bee-ready. It just so happened that I had a 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher whose uncle was a beekeeper, in North Carolina I believe (I never found out who he was). I had mentioned my desire to be a beekeeper in class and my teacher heard me. She told me that she would get me an empty bee hive if I promised to fill it with bees. I agreed, without my parents knowing, and a bee hive showed up at my house a few weeks later! That was the impetus my parents needed.



**(l) My small apiary. I tell people that I am a hobbyist beekeeper at home, where I keep around 7 colonies, and a commercial beekeeper at work. (r) My backyard colonies are largely responsible for pollinating the blueberries and vegetable plants in our small orchard and garden seen here. They otherwise exist to amaze me.**

They were stuck. They had to let me get a colony; after all, one of my teachers was invested in my new-found interest!

My parents, in their wisdom, did not want me to get started on my own so they actively sought a mentor for their budding entrepreneur. My father worked with someone who was a beekeeper earlier in his life and he had given all of his beekeeping equipment to a friend of his named Joe Miller. It was this friend-of-a-friend who became my mentor. Mr. Miller took me under his wing when I was 12, taught me for 6 or so months, and then gave me the bees that I immediately moved into the empty hive given me by my teacher. I was a beekeeper! I even got stung my first trip

out to my own hive! It was awesome. As a side note, Mr. Miller developed lung cancer early in my beekeeping career. He passed away when I was 13 and left me his colonies and equipment. I owe my beekeeping foundation to him.

My years post-mentor were probably the most challenging of my beekeeping career. I had no one to ask questions and no one to supervise my new hobby. I had 16 colonies on my grandparents' property and I learned the hard way – I learned about bees and beekeeping by working bees. And work bees I did. I went to visit them weekly. I would have gone daily if my parents would have taken me. I went through season after season, making honey, controlling swarms

(well, trying to control swarms), managing pests and diseases, and otherwise engaging in all things husbandry related. Those were great years.

I remained super active in bees/beekeeping throughout my middle and high school years. For example, I was a 4-Her in school and bees were always the subject of my 4-H projects. I even found ways to incorporate bees into my science fair projects. I can say with certainty that my participation in science fair and 4-H (and the teachers/leaders who assisted me with both) motivated me to choose the career path I am in now.

From high school, I went to the University of Georgia (Gooooo Dawgs) to work on a BS in biology. I was fortunate during my high school years to call on Dr. Keith Delaplane for assistance with my 4-H and science fair projects. Dr. Delaplane was (and is) the honey bee extension specialist at UGA. He invited me to work in his lab while I attended UGA. I was super excited about this. I met him and signed the paperwork my first day on campus as an undergraduate. I spent all four years of my undergraduate life at UGA helping Dr. Delaplane. I was basically his undergraduate lab assistant. I took care of the apiary, assisted in research projects, and otherwise did what I was told.

As I approached the completion of my undergraduate degree requirements, Dr. Delaplane helped set the stage for my next bee-endeavor: graduate school. He suggested that I consider going overseas to graduate school. What a great idea! I applied to and was accepted by Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa. Now, that was a change in pace from my early life in Georgia!

I loved my time in South Africa. I was there formally to investigate small hive beetles. However, I spent a lot of time working with Cape honey bees, *scutellata* (the "killer" honey bee), and honey bee ecology. What an experience. If you ever get a chance to go to South Africa – take it . . .



**The equipment shed. What beekeeping operation is complete without a small tractor and a shed full of supers, hive bodies, bottom boards, etc.? Someday I will have a honey house – I guess when I move to an area where bees can make honey ☺.**



(l) My oldest son, Mathias, helping me with my bees. (r) My entire family [from left to right: me holding Jude (2), Amanda holding Evelyn Grace (3 months), Analy (4), and Mathias (5)]. Beekeeping is an art that I have been able to share with others.

After obtaining my PhD from Rhodes, I took a brief detour through UGA as a Post Doc in Dr. Delaplane's lab. That led me to where I am today – the University of Florida. I was hired by UF in August of 2006. I now manage my own lab, oversee graduate students/technicians/post docs/etc., and wonder everyday how I could be so lucky.

Throughout it all, I continue to manage honey bees. I am still a beekeeper. I chuckle a bit when I travel and give beekeeping-related talks to bee clubs around the world. Everyone wants to hear the science, the latest research, and the next cutting-edge technology soon to be available to beekeepers everywhere. But, the question I get more than any other (well, at least as much as any other) is: "are you a beekeeper"? I chuckle because I fully recognize that it is a test of my "street cred". My emphatic answer every time is "yes, I am a beekeeper".

Beekeeping has been great to me and now to my ever-expanding family. I married an amazing young lady (Amanda Ellis) in 2002. Amanda has a BS degree in wildlife biology from UGA and MS in Zoology from Rhodes. Most impressive though is that she later decided to get a PhD from UGA in pollination ecology. She's smart and beautiful (did I mention otherwise "perfect"?). We have 4 children: Mathias (5), Analy (4), Jude (2), and Evelyn Grace (3 months). Mathias works bees with me and even traveled to South Africa with me recently to collect samples of Cape honey bees. Beekeeping continues to be a blessing for me and now I can share it with my family.

So – why did I tell you all of this? Well, it is quite simple. I have been thinking for some time that I would love to write a column in the *American Bee Journal* about "how to keep bees". My thought is that I could share "how to" ideas on all things

related to bees and beekeeping. I teach a beekeeping course at UF so I thought that this course would translate nicely into a column.

I was speaking at a honey bee health summit recently in St. Louis. Joe Graham, editor of the *American Bee Journal*, contacted me after seeing me at that meeting and asked if I had ever considered writing a column on beekeeping "how-to's". Call it serendipity. Call it divine intervention. Call it whatever. I jumped on the idea.

That is what the article is. It is my introduction to me. I wanted you to hear a little bit of my background and get to know something about me now that I will join the *American Bee Journal* family and be spending so much time with you in the

future. My years as a beekeeper have taught me a lot about what I do not know about bees and beekeeping. However, what I do know I plan to share with you through this monthly column.

My current intention with this column is to give you step-by-step instructions on how to keep bees. This will include discussions on all sorts of topics, from assembling equipment and setting up an apiary to recognizing and controlling bee pests and diseases. I also want to teach you about the biology/ecology of the amazing insect with which we all interact. My plan is to cover a given topic monthly, for example: assembling a frame. I will cover such topics in step-by-step detail and include high-quality photographs to augment my text. I also will include a second small section in my article each month and in it I will discuss some aspect of honey bee biology. This approach will allow me to (1) focus on a specific "how to" topic (the main thrust of the column) and (2) throw in a bit of information on bee biology – information that I share with college students taking my course.

The name of my column will be *Field Guide to Beekeeping*. Though this article is not a good example for obvious reasons, I will try not to be too verbose with my column. I feel that instructions are often lost in the details of wordy articles. My commitment to you is to tell you the facts, all the facts, and nothing but the facts

I really look forward to sharing with you my love for beekeeping. Honey bees have done a lot for me over the years. I sometimes marvel at the direction my life has taken on the backs of these tiny little creatures. Man's association with honey bees goes back thousands of years. I am but a small part of that association. I hope that this column will allow me to be a part of your association with bees. To the future! Happy beekeeping.

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