

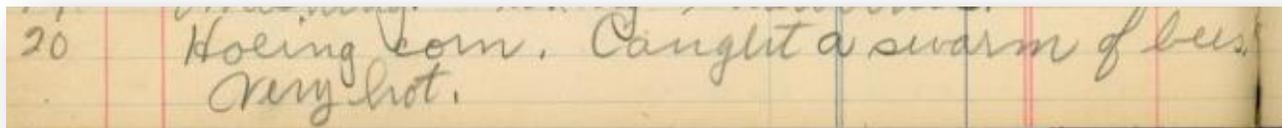
## ☞ The Bees ☞

The growing season for Fussville farms during the spring of 1929 was just about perfect with lots of “fine days,” sunshine and warmth, along with ample rain. By mid-June, the crops on the Claas farm were flourishing and the early summer harvest of hay and garden crops had just gotten underway. Behind the scenes, transparent to most everyone was the work of untold millions: honey bees of course.

If you listened closely, you could hear the buzzing of the workers as they went about their tasks. They were collecting nectar from blooming garden plants, fruit trees and farm crops, doing the important work of pollinating, moving from blossom to blossom with no notice or fanfare. It was, after all, just what they did.



The day before the summer solstice of 1929 was sunny but very hot. Just a short walk from the Claas house, a steady hum from those bees was building at the periphery of Harry’s apple orchard. But this wasn’t the ordinary sound of bees at work. It was the building sound caused by many thousands of bees, forming a new swarm. Never before had Tonie made mention of the presence of bees in the garden, orchard or crops, until that day.

A photograph of a single strip of lined notebook paper with handwritten text in cursive. The text reads: "20 Hoeing corn. Caught a swarm of bees. Very hot." The paper is slightly aged and has vertical red lines.

**June 20, 1929** - *“Hoeing corn. Caught a swarm of bees. Very hot.”*

It was a Thursday afternoon, the last day of spring. Tonie provided no further details about these bees. But her subsequent notes tell us that this was the beginning of a new idea for the farm’s income ... honey. How did Harry go about catching a swarm of bees? He had never done that before. And then, once he “caught” it, what did he do with it?

A swarm is a term used to describe a grouping of honey bees that split off from a “mother colony” to start a new hive. So why did this colony split off? Perhaps there were differences of opinions among the bees or differing loyalties. No one really knew and the bees weren’t talking. Whatever the reason, Harry decided that it was a good idea to capture that swarm and give them a new home. One thing for sure, Harry did not have the

knowledge or equipment to be able to handle the swarm in the most efficient way. He wasn't a beekeeper, but that would change.



Tonie didn't mention that she nor Harry nor any of their sons or daughters were stung by the bees in the act of "catching the swarm." But experts tell us that contrary to common misconceptions, honey bees were at their most docile when swarming. At this stage, they did not have a hive with honey and a brood to protect, and the bees were full of honey that they brought from their original hive. And like people, some swarms of bees were simply just nicer than others.

The swarm that showed up broke off from a colony, somewhere in the Fussville area. It had survived the previous winter and was strong enough (and determined enough) to separate and go its own way. Although Tonie didn't describe the location of the swarm, it was possible that it settled in a tree, somewhere near the orchard, not a place that Harry would have wanted it to take up residence. He knew that he needed to act soon to find a better location for it, before the swarm got too comfortable.

So, after sizing up the situation, around sundown he suited up (covering most of his body except his face) and carefully approached the swarm with a saw and a box. (Bees tend to settle down around dusk and become very docile.) He removed a few of the main branches of the tree on which the bees had collected and placed them in a box. Then he carefully moved the box away from the orchard, closer to the woods. There, the bees could go about their work in peace, without being a nuisance, far enough removed from the house and buildings, somewhere those bees could call their home.

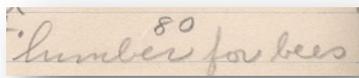
Harry was going to have to learn a whole lot very quickly to help this swarm survive. Tonie's subsequent journal entries would lead us to believe that in spite of Harry's best efforts over the summer months, the swarm did not survive.

Either the bees drifted away, joining up with other swarms or they died for lack of a strong central colony. The life span for an individual bee was short, only a few months. But Harry's interest had been piqued. Where there were bees, there was honey. And where there was honey, there was money. He was determined to learn the ropes about becoming a beekeeper.

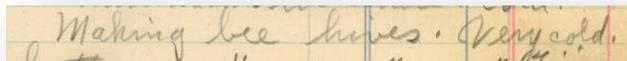
After doing some research, Harry got busy. In January 1930, he purchased some lumber and put his expert carpentry skills to practice. Bees would need a home so Harry came up with plans for “bee boxes,” the homes which would serve as the hive for a new swarm. Building bee boxes was a perfect job for cold winter days. They didn’t need to be fancy, just something that would keep a swarm comfortable. Those bees were going to provide the newest product line of the Claas Family farm.



*“Making bee boxes. Very cold.”*

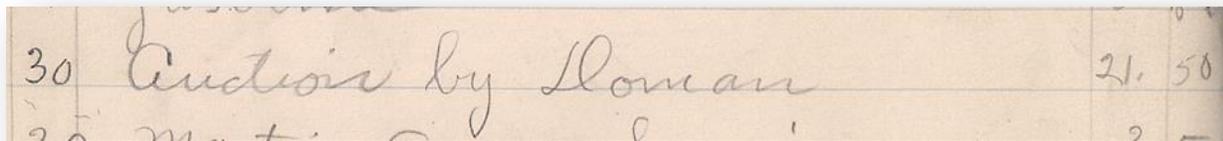


*“Lumber for bees.”*



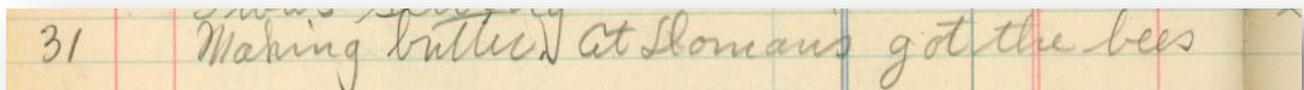
*“Making bee hives. Very cold.”*

Soon the bees had a home. Now all Harry needed were bees. The place for bees in Menomonee Falls was Doman’s, a supplier of farm supplies.



**January 30, 1930** - *“Auction by Doman...\$21.50”*

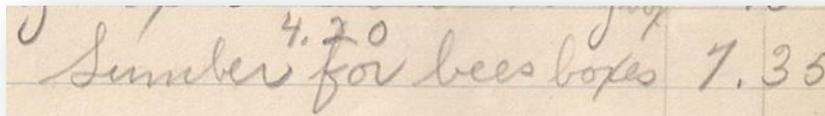
It might seem unusual, but Doman’s held an auction for quantities of bees. The bees came in a package which was essentially a man-made swarm. A package included all of the necessary components for a functioning hive: worker bees, drones and of course, the queen. The next day, Harry went back to Doman’s and picked up the bees.



**January 31, 1930** - *“Making butter. At Doman’s got the bees.”*

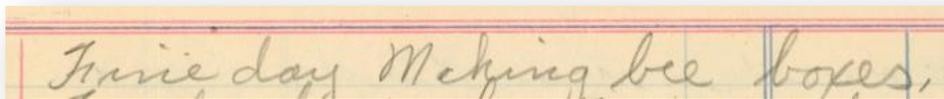
There was much curiosity about what this new project was going to look like. Those bees were going to be the engine for honey production and in the process, they would provide an essential service ... pollination. But how would this work in the middle of winter? The bees in this package weren't going to be buzzing around. It was still really cold. Until it was time to be released into the wild, Harry kept the bees in the package, in a small crate in the basement of his house.

Bees didn't hibernate. They didn't go dormant. They just slowed down and huddled closely together, sharing body heat and feeding on stored food supplies. Over the next couple months, the task was simple. Just keep the bees alive and fed until spring arrived. In the meantime, work continued as Harry and the boys continued to build more boxes.



Lumber for bees boxes 7.35

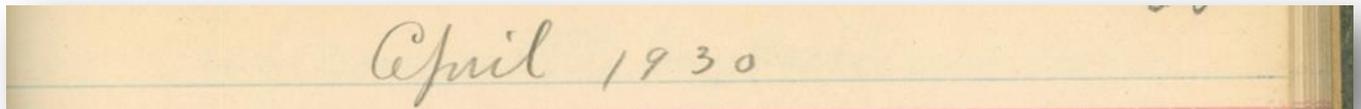
*"Lumber for bees boxes. \$7.35"*



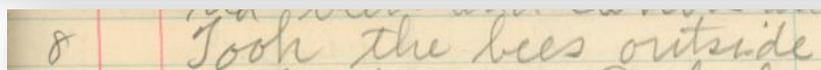
Fine day Making bee boxes.

*"Fine day. Making bees boxes."*

Finally, the day arrived. A couple months after picking up his hive from Doman's, Harry took the finished "bee boxes" and the package of bees out to the edge of his woods.



April 1930



8 Took the bees outside

**April 8, 1930 - "Took the bees outside."**

The development of the hive began. Harry placed the package of bees in one of the boxes which he had built. Even a little cold weather wasn't going to get those bees down. The queen started to grow her hive of workers and drones. New bees would grow to maturity in about three weeks, just in time for spring when fruit trees and flowers would begin to blossom. Harry was optimistic. He kept purchasing materials and building more boxes.



21 Bee boxes and accessories 44.09  
 350 1.50

**April 21, 1930** - *“Bee boxes and accessories...\$44.09.”*

21 Raining. Cold. Making bee boxes and to Watertown.  
 22 Making bee Boxes. Cold and windy

**April 21, 1930** - *“Raining. Cold. Making bee boxes and to Watertown.”*

**April 22, 1930** - *“Making bee boxes. Cold and windy.”*

And even more optimistically, Harry purchased another queen bee.

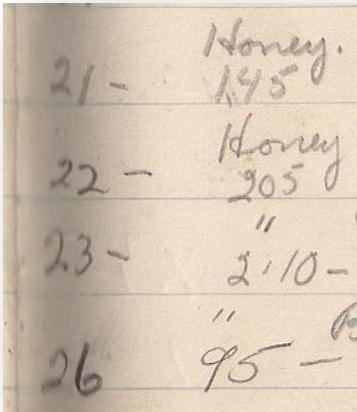
May.

20 Bee Queen from Watertown. 1.00

**May 20, 1930** - *“Bee Queen from Watertown...\$1.00.”*

As he built more bee boxes, he realized that he could create a second hive by planting another queen in his hive. She would instinctively relocate (two queens couldn't coexist) and take some workers and a few drones along with her. Harry was banking that she would find a new home in one of the boxes that he placed strategically near (but not too near) the original hive. Now it was left to nature to take its course.

Starting in July 1930, Tonie began to document the sales of honey.



**July 21, 1930** - "Honey...\$1.45."

**July 22, 1930** - "Honey...\$2.05."

**July 23, 1930** - "Honey...\$2.10."

**July 26, 1930** - "Honey...\$0.95."

Over the next few months and years, the honey sales were modest. At first, it seemed that keeping bees to provide a supplement to the farm income was more of a hope than reality. But hope sprang eternal. It became apparent that beekeeping and a steady

income from honey sales really became more of a hobby than a reliable source of any substantial income.

Handwritten summary of honey sales for 1934 on lined paper:

Date	Price	Quantity	Total
July 24	1.00	100	100
28	.65	130	84.50
30	.50	60	30
31	1.25	20	25
Aug 2	.25	35	8.75
4	.45	55	24.75
7	.20	20	4
9	.80	40	32
10	.25	20	5
11	.25	80	20
14	.35	55	19.25
16	.20		
Oct 2	1.05		1.05
" 4	.55		.55
" 6	.20		.20
" 12	1.85		1.85
" 16	.55		.55
" 21	1.10		1.10
			39.00

In Tonie's summary of honey sales for 1934, the total gross income was \$16.80. That was a lot of effort (not to mention the discomfort of frequent bee stings) for not a lot of return.

Those bees produced only a modest return on Harry's investment. And that didn't include the value of Harry's, Tonie's or the boys' time in tending to the hives, in extracting honey from the hives or the cost of bottling and distributing the honey. It became apparent that honey production, at least on this scale, was not a money maker.

Then, of course, there were expenses. There were supplies for lumber to make bee boxes, the purchase of a queen or a new swarm when necessary, the cost for extracting honey and the cost for honey jars.

PHONE  
MENOMONEE FALLS 145

**HONEY ACRES INC.**  
BUSY - BEE  
BRAND

COMB AND EXTRACTED HONEY  
APIARY LOCATED ON HIGHWAY 166  
1 1/2 MILES SOUTHEAST OF MENOMONEE FALLS  
MAIL ADDRESS, MENOMONEE FALLS, WIS.

MEMORANDUM  
DATE *Sept. 3, 1937*  
TO *Colony*

<i>7 of 10 jars</i>	<i>85</i>
<i>7 of 20 "</i>	<i>60</i>
<i>50-50 jars</i>	<i>2.75</i>
	<i>4.20</i>

*Harry  
Tonie  
Boys*

*Oct. 1935*

*14 Bee supplies 104.00*

*18 Extracting honey by Roebel 2.00*

**October 14, 1935** – “*Bee Supplies ... \$104.00*”

**October 18, 1935** – “*Extracting honey by Roebel ... \$2.00*”

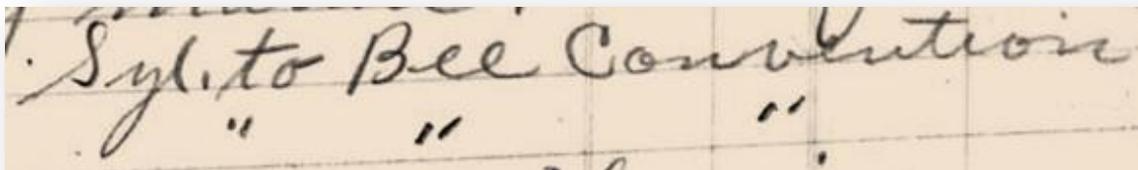
Perhaps more valuable to Harry than the honey production was the byproduct value of having thousands of his own bees, serving as pollinators for fruit and garden crops. They worked silently during the important spring and summer months. They were low maintenance and yet they performed their duties without interruption.

Throughout the years that followed, Tonie kept meticulous records of the income from the production of honey, along with the other garden products.

*Honey, Beets Carrots Tomatoes Pick Dill Beans*

“*Honey, Beets, Carrots, Tomatoes, Pickles, Dill, Beans*”

Compared to the income from beets or carrots or tomatoes or pickles or dill or beans, the amount of money taken in for honey on Tonie's sales trips "to town" was just a pittance. Soon, it became quite apparent that while the bee project might have been a honey maker, it certainly was not a money maker. It was a net loss. Something had to give. Either Harry had to scale up the project (something that was going to take up more of his time), or he had to give it up.



**November 7-8, 1935 - "Syl. to Bee Convention."**

In 1936, Tonie stopped reporting the sale of honey. That wouldn't have been surprising given the small amounts of honey sales that were generated. Perhaps Harry might have given up the bee project. That was the same year that young Sylvester Claas, Harry and Tonie's oldest son was married. He and his young bride, Eleanor took up residence at their nearby farm on Mill Road. And although it wasn't mentioned in Tonie's journal, those bee boxes that were so carefully crafted by Harry and his sons, made their way to Sylvester's farm.

Two months earlier, Sylvester attended a "Bee Convention," most likely a gathering of beekeepers from around the state or the Midwest. It was a chance for him to rub elbows with the experts. From there, Sylvester continued that hobby for another fifteen years or so. Bees continued to pollinate crops on Fussville area farms. And bees continued to gather the honey which ended up on Claas family tables.

Just an aside, when Sylvester and Eleanor Claas eventually sold their Mill Road farm around 1952, they moved to another farm near Watertown. They left Fussville behind, but they took with them all of the bee boxes. The skill and experience which they learned all stemmed from a hot sunny day, years earlier in 1929 and continued on a farm in Watertown, some 40 miles distant and several decades later. On that day, June 20, 1929, a swarm of bees took flight and landed near Fussville, on a tree in Harry's orchard.



*Loved you from the start, Honey.  
Bless your little heart, Honey.  
Every day would be so sunny,  
Honey with you.  
("Honey" - Rudy Vallee, 1929)*

