

The Free Press' Short Story

CATHERINE'S BEE TREE

BETH B. GLOERIST

ONE might search our woods for a month nowadays without being able to find a bee tree. As a matter of fact, not many people keep bees at present. I know of but a single apiary within twelve miles of our old place, and that is managed on such strictly scientific lines that swarms never escape to the woods. The bees are not allowed to swarm in the natural way, but are "divided" at the proprietor's good pleasure. No doubt that is the best way to keep bees, or at least the most profitable way.

But it was all quite different fifty years ago, when there were forty-one bee sheds in our small town alone and the bees swarmed as nature prompted them. Mostly this was toward the end of June and throughout July, often on a Sabbath morning while the farmer and his family were at the meetinghouse three or four miles away. In consequence a good many young swarms escaped to the woods and took up their abode in hollow trees, usually a venerable old sugar maple or a lofty basswood. A tree that had round holes far up the trunk, holes made by woodpeckers or yellow hammers and opening into a capacious cavity, was most frequently the new home chosen by the vagrant swarm.

Hunting bee trees was a well-recognized pastime with us and ranked next after trapping and hunting deer, moose and bears. August and September was the time for it, at the end of the honey-gathering season and before the bees had begun to consume their stored sweets; and the prizes of bee-hunting were large old swarms that had gone unmolested for several years and had laid up large stores. Such a bee tree would sometimes yield a hundredweight of honey; and we heard of one from which three hundred and eleven pounds were taken. A tree with a hundredweight of honey we considered a fine capture; that was enough to keep a small family in sweets throughout the winter. Or, if it were carried to market with the comb unbroken, it would fetch fifteen dollars, as honey usually sold.

But that was always the chief difficulty, to get the honey from the tree without smashing the combs and making a mess of it. For the method generally followed, when storming a bee tree, was to fell it with axes, and the shock of the fall often destroyed the integrity of the combs. A great many schemes and devices were made use of to avoid such damage and at the same time deal with the enraged bees.

Finding a bee tree, even when there were a great many of them in the woods, was far from being as easy as one might at first think it, since the bees were generally high up in some old tree surrounded by younger leafy growth, which prevented them from being seen. It is not often that the ordinary hum of bees can be heard when they are forty feet from the ground. Good ears and sharp eyes were needed for hunting bee trees. One method quite common was to knock vigorously with an axe on the trunks of all trees suspected of being the abode of swarms, then listen for the deeper humming that would follow the disturbance.

When a bee tree was discovered, the established practice was for the finder to cut his initials in the bark. That generally protected it from misappropriation by other bee hunters, though, sad to say, there were a few rogues who were charged with prowling about to discover bee trees already pre-empted and either robbing them at once or shaving off the initials of the rightful finder and substituting their own. Then it was a case of one man's word against another's.

One undoubted rascal in our vicinity had for several years practiced this mean kind of robbery and grew so cunning that he at length resorted to the use of false initials on trees, his own having become too notorious to shield him from the indignation of those he cheated. He came to grief at last, caught in his own toils, as I shall try to relate.

Early one July Catherine Edwards, one of our youthful neighbors, discovered a bee tree that she felt sure would yield a fine lot of honey by the end of August. This was after her father's death and while Catherine and her mother were attempting to carry on their little farm—just across the fields from the Old Squire's place—largely by their own unaided efforts. Catherine was piecing out their small means by gathering and curing wild herbs, which she sold at pharmacy in Portland. She was on the farm one day while on one of her jaunts after thoroughwort at Shucklin's Dale, an abandoned farm five miles away in the "great woods." This tree was a huge old basswood almost four feet in diameter and fifty feet or more up to the first branches. In fact it had now few branches, large or small, being largely a dead, hollow trunk standing among a clump of large shaggy, green hemlocks that almost wholly concealed the top of it.

Catherine had sat down in the shade of the hemlock to rest a bit and laid down her sack of herbs, for the afternoon was very warm, when she heard the humming of bees and at length discerned

them entering at two holes far up in the old basswood. Not only were the bees going into the holes, but great numbers were emerging and alighting in a dark mass on a dry limb near the top of one of the hemlocks. The bees were in a set of sending forth a young swarm—a circumstance from which Catherine concluded that the bees had been there for some time and probably had laid up considerable honey. She at once resolved to put her mark on the tree and later make an effort to secure the honey, of which there might very likely be fifteen or twenty dollars' worth. She hastened home and, returning with an axe and a knife, smoothed and freshened a place on the bark, near the ground and cut her initials, C. E., very distinctly in it.

Afterwards for three or four weeks Catherine visited the tree; and her mark was there right up to about the middle of August. Then on going there late one afternoon, she saw staring her in the face, not her own C. E., but the letters M. O. T., cut very large. Some unscrupulous fellow had shaved off her initials with an axe, cutting clean through to the white wood beneath the bark, and burned those others there very large and black, apparently with a hot iron.

At first Catherine was astonished and could hardly credit the evidence of her eyes; then she grew indignant and aggrieved. That evening she came hastening over to tell us her wrongs. She was so busy, so hard worked, at that time that she rarely came to call unless it was to ask the Old Squire's advice about something that was troubling them at their farm.

"What shall I do?" she said. "Shall I give it up? What can one do? I hoped I would get enough from that bee tree to keep us in sugar all winter."

The Old Squire looked thoughtful. He sympathized with Catherine and wanted to help her. "I am sorry you did not have a witness present when you marked the tree," he observed. "Things done off in the woods are hard to prove in court. Have you any idea who this M. O. T. is?"

"Not the slightest," replied Catherine. "I cannot think of anyone whose name could be spelled with those letters."

"Well, I can," I interrupted, for of late I had been hearing many stories about a certain disreputable fellow citizen. "Those letters stand for no one's real name. The rogue who put them there doesn't dare cut his own initials on a bee tree. These merely stand for 'my own tree'—which he believes isn't actionable."

"Very likely," was the Old Squire's comment. "Well, Cathy, the best thing to do will be to go and get that honey early to-morrow morning before M. O. T., or anybody else arrives. You ought to have it, and we will go with you and help you get it."

Anyone seeing us set off next morning might have guessed the purpose of the expedition. Catherine had come over at five o'clock to load the way. We had a long cross-cut saw to carry, also an axe, the bee-smoker, a roll of brimstone in an old kettle, six tin buckets for the honey, a coil of rope and a bulky bundle containing heavy gloves, thick outer garments and plenty of mosquito-net.

Fortunately, we could drive by devious trails to within a mile and a half of the tree, but we had to carry the outfit from that point. This, as may be said here, was after Theodora Addison and Halstead had gone from home; Ellen and I accompanied the Old Squire and Catherine.

After a tiresome walk through the forest we reached the place and spent some little time reconnoitering the situation. It was a difficult one at best, since the big basswood, already an infirm old tree, leaned partly on one of the large hemlocks a few steps away. All the trees throughout inclined a little towards the brook. Up at the holes the bees were coming and going in great numbers. There could be no doubt that it was a bee tree; there too was that bold M. O. T. where Catherine's mark had been shaved off. Now and then a scout bee found its way down near us. The Old Squire caught one under his hat. As we had suspected, they were Egyptian bees, a variety then kept in considerable numbers at several farms in that county, but afterwards replaced by Golden Italians. Egyptian bees were fairly good honey gatherers, but intractable to handle.

We looked up at our tree with keen satisfaction. The job, to be sure, was not done—indeed, not even started. But we had beaten our unknown enemy to the battleground, and nothing could disturb us now; at least so it seemed.

To those of my readers who have never tackled a bee tree—and I presume they are a great many—I suppose I should give some idea of the thrill that finding a bee tree, and tackling it, always gave me. It is like hunting, except that somehow it seems less cruel, for even the most humanitarian person cannot feel quite the same toward an insect as he does toward a higher animal. Besides, the purpose of hunting a bee tree is not to kill the bees, but to get the honey. It is something like fishing, too. You

do it out of doors; you are enjoying healthful exercise in the woods, generally; and there is always that thrill of the unknown which make all quests, whether for game or fish or treasure or bees, highly exciting. And in the business of attending to bee trees there is a very real element, certainly of pain, frequently of danger.

Had we used axes to fell the tree, the jar of the strokes would probably have been noticed aloft and brought the bees down upon us, but the fainter rasping of the saw did not appear to be felt so far skyward. Sawing the tree proved to be a less arduous task than we had at first supposed it would be, since the trunk was rotten within, having only a thin shell of sound wood on the outside. The Old Squire had thought that when the basswood was sawn asunder at the ground it might roll off the hemlock and so come to earth between that and another hemlock a few yards away. It started and settled a few feet when sawn no more than halfway through, but the limbs of the hemlock were very stiff, and the basswood failed to dislodge itself, and hung fast.

Nothing now remained but to fell the hemlock—a somewhat perilous job owing to the imminent and insecure position of the larger tree. The jar too had now disturbed the bees. So many of them flew down that we were forced to retire to a distance and arm ourselves against them with gloves and nets over our hats.

Sawing off the hemlock proved the very worst of tasks. It was a large, sound tree, and the great weight resting on it caused the saw to bind in the scarf. Wedges had constantly to be made and driven in following the saw, to hold the scarf open. At best a great exertion of strength was required to pull the saw to and fro; and after every few minutes, too, a sharp crackling overhead would send us jumping away for dear life, lest the basswood and the bees should fall on us. Moreover, it was a hot August day.

I grew much fatigued, and I am sure the Old Squire did, but he was too considerate of Catherine's feelings to say so. Not a few bees were now darting at our heads and hands, and the extra heat conserved by the thick armor we had put on added to the discomfort of our efforts. Time and again Catherine and Ellen urged us to let them pull at the saw, and once we allowed them to

try it; but they soon found the labor beyond their strength. I think we were occupied for more than two hours sawing away at that stubborn tree. We had aimed the scarf so as to have the tree fall out between two of the other hemlocks and take the basswood with it. But when it was about three-quarters sawn it suddenly broke across the saw scarf and crashed against another hemlock; and even then the basswood did not fall all the way down, but lodged against the second hemlock. The trunk of the tree now lay on a long slant against the hemlock we had last felled, the upper part of it, where the bees were, being about fifteen feet from the ground.

The Old Squire laughed. "We have made a bad job of it," he declared. "Now we shall have to fell a third tree to get them all."

This bade fair to be a yet more dangerous task, since the big basswood hung in a ticklish way, looking as if it might fall of its own accord at any moment. The bees too were now all out. Their angry hum was almost a roar. They fairly pattered against our nets, gloves and coats in their savage efforts to drive us away. As honey bees often leave their

stings when they strike, our hats and clothes were literally covered with those little black daggers. A good deal of time had also been lost; it was already mid-afternoon. Owing to the heat too, showers were gathering and thunder grumbling.

The Old Squire looked about; and for

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