

The Beekeeper

This story was written as part of Samantha's search for treasure that I hid when I was in Victoria last Christmas (Dec 2010). As part of that search he was asked to identify the person in the photo on the right and tell me what he was doing.

Hi Samantha,

You're right, it is Peter J. Reimer – your Great-Grandfather and my Grandfather. He kept a few hives of bees on the 'farm' in Newton (near Vancouver). We three boys (and sometimes our cousins) were always careful to keep well away from the hives when we hiked out to the woods behind Grandpa and Grandma's house, but on harvesting days, they were always the centre of attraction.



On those days, we would crowd around the storage shed at the back as Grandpa put on his protective suit and headgear. He would then search for just the right kind of twigs and needles to put in the smoker. This is a hand-held device that is used to produce smoke to be directed into the beehive. I have a picture of it here. You can see it is like a tin mug, with a bellows on the back to blow the smoke and a nozzle in the top that directs the smoke.



Grandpa would light the twigs in the bottom of the container and put some leaves or pine needles on top to produce the smoke. When he put the lid back on and squeezed the bellows, puffs of smoke would come out the top. The smoke helps to calm the bees since it somehow stimulates them to eat rather than fight and it covers the smell of the pheromones released by the guard bees that signal for the other bees to sting. Researchers believe that bees have developed this reaction to smoke since it increases their chance of surviving forest fires. When they smell smoke, they start to eat so they can fly away from the hive well fed if the fire arrives.

With his protective gear on and his smoker in his hand, Grandpa looked like an astronaut or a worker at a hazardous material site. That's why I took the picture of him with my little Brownie camera. This is the picture I sent you a few days ago.

Grandpa would then put the smoker, a few empty honeycomb frames, and some jars of sugar water in the wheelbarrow and bounce off to the beehives to collect the honey. We stayed well back from the hives, of course, since we had no protection and didn't want to get stung.



From our perch far away from the hives we would see him squeeze in a few squirts of smoke from his smoker then take the lid off the hive. He would then pull out the frames one by one. They would be covered with bees as he pulled them out, but he would put in an empty frame to replace it and squirt them with the smoker. They would slowly clear off the old frame and head back to the hive to begin work on the new one.

Grandpa would repeat this process with the other frames – each time pulling out a full one and replacing it with a new one. Finally, he put the jar of sugar water in the hive, closed up the top, and headed back to the storage shed with a wheelbarrow full of honey combs. Now would begin the part we liked best!

This was the part where Grandma and Grandpa would extract the lovely sweet honey from the honeycombs. By the time that Grandpa arrived with the wheelbarrow, Grandma had set up the honey extractor in the kitchen and was warming up a big knife on the cookstove. The extractor reminded me of the old style washing machines that was used in those days. It was a large round steel tub with a lid and crank on the top. I have added a photo of one to help you figure out what it looks like.



Grandpa would take a frame with the honeycomb from the wheelbarrow and place it on the table that Grandma set up beside the extractor. He would then take the hot knife from the stove and carefully cut off the top of the honeycomb – revealing the honey within. Then it was our turn to scoop up the sweet honeycomb tops and pop them in our mouths. It made wonderful gum!

Meanwhile Grandpa would pick up each frame and carefully place it vertically in the extractor where it fit nicely in the wire contraption inside. You can see it in the photo. After he had lowered four of the frames into the extractor, Grandma would put the lid on and invite us to start turning the crank.



We could hear the whirr of the frames inside the extractor and watch as the thick light brown honey started to flow out of the spigot at the bottom of the extractor into the canning jar that Grandma had placed there. When we opened the extractor lid and pulled up the frames all that was left were the white honeycombs without the sweet contents – they were slowly running down the sides of the extractor and out the spigot in the bottom.

That was the routine: replace the empty frames with full ones, put a new jar under the spigot, spin the extractor, and repeat the process. It didn't take long before we had filled up a nice set of jars and prepared a new set of frames – ready for the bees to fill. We were also usually covered from head to toe with sticky honey as a result of our lifting, spinning, tasting, chewing, and scooping. It was as 'bad' as hanging out in a sugar shack as your mother did here in Québec so many years later.

So that's your second clue – now comes the third. Are you getting any idea where your treasure might be hidden? The third clue requires you to answer the following question.

What kind of a creature eats mosquitoes (yah!!), can travel at almost 100 km per hour, but has trouble walking? It belongs to an order named Okonata and an infraorder named Anisoptera. What's an order and infraorder?

Love,
Bill (June 8, 2011)