My Job Extracting Honey

From 1980 to 1990, we owned a small sheep ranch in Lonepine Montana and for three summers, I worked for Morgan Honey extracting that year’s honey crop. In late summer, Jim would start bringing in his hives and would call in his crew.

Once the hives were brought in from their summer locations, our work began. The night before, Jim would fumigate the warehouse where the extracting equipment was housed, to kill any bees that had accumulated that day. This process would be repeated every night. In the morning, I would gather with the crew in the extracting room. This room had a knife assembly for cutting the wax off the honey comb, a conveyor system made to hold the frames vertical and 3 extracting machines.

As frames were unloaded from the supers, Jim would place the frames into the machine that held a hot knife blade. As each frame was dropped down, the knife would cut the beeswax from each side of the frame as it traveled along. The frame would be dripping with golden threads of honey of many different fragrances. Honey is flavored by the blossoms the bees forage on, and different areas would produce different flavored honey – clover, knapweed, alfalfa,

The frames would begin their journey down the knife machine and onto a conveyor system that carried the frames on to us, the extracting crew. There were three extracting machines that looked like big washing machines with lids. I would take the dripping frames and drop them into slots built in the machines. I would try to judge the amount of weight in each frame and would space the frames out in the machine between light and heavy weight. The bins were large, probably 4’ across. Once the extractor was full of frames, the lid was closed and the machine would begin spinning the frames with a centrifugal force that would spin the honey out of the honeycomb and into the bin. If the frames weren’t balanced inside the machine, the extractor could spin like an unbalanced washing machine and, spinning wildly, could come loose from its moorings. Once this machine was loaded and running, I would load machine number 2 and number 3. By the time the third machine was filled and spinning, number 1 would be finished. I would unload the spun frames and begin loading again. As I worked, the honey would flow out the bottom extractor, out through pipes and into a large holding tank, another flow of golden syrup of honey. My bonus at the end of the summer was a 5 gallon bucket of honey.

As we worked, bees would be crawling all over. They would come in with the supers and while honey bees are not aggressive, if you caught one with your hand or it got squeezed between you and the equipment, you got stung. I loved this job and worked there for 3 years, but each year as I got stung, I reacted a little more to the bee’s venom. When I got stung 3 times on the same hand on the same day, my extraction days were over. My fingers, hand and arm were swollen to my elbow. After a trip to the doctor and a course of steroids, my doctor told me that no more, this job was done.

I would miss those 5 gallon buckets of honey.