

AGRICULTURE

# Land of bees and honey

North state remains 'Golden Triangle' for apiaries amid challenges and changes



A queen, lower right, moves along a frame with other bees in her hive maintained by Hill and Ward Apiaries on farmland along Highway 162 in Willows, on Wednesday. EVAN TUCHINSKY — ENTERPRISE RECORD

**By Evan Tuchinsky**

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Much like the ride to beehives he's situated on farmland, Kevin Ward took a long, unexpected route to the north state. He grew up in New Zealand in a beekeeping family, started traveling the world in 1973 and moved to Canada in 1976. That's when and where he met his wife, Laurel Hill-Ward, who also comes from a line of beekeepers — but in Willows. Ten years later, he moved to run her parents' business and bought it in 1994.

Hill and Ward Apiaries remains one of the industry leaders along with C.F. Koehnen and Sons in Ord Bend and Heitkam's Honey Bees in Orland, among others. At an age when many wind down their careers, Ward continues to “shake bees” with crews who move from hive cluster to hive cluster and transfer queens, drones and workers into “packages” for shipping.

It's hard work. On a recent morning, Ward played his part in a well-oiled process that yielded 500 pounds of bees in an hour, bound for Minnesota. Friend — and, for decades, competitor — Jerry Hightower joined in, though they left the heavy lifting to the crew.

What keeps them doing this? And why here? They and the Koehnens, now four generations deep in beekeeping, offered similar answers. Bees are in their blood, proverbially speaking, and the area offers conditions conducive to apiaries.

“Some people go off and do other things,” Ward observed, including his son who got a masters degree and worked elsewhere before coming back home. “It's a job that's frustrating with all the problems we have — but I never wanted to be an indoor guy, and I grew up in the bee business.

“I like the rural lifestyle; I like it around here,” he added. “It's not perfect, but nowhere is.”

Apiaries constitute the seventh-leading ag sector in Butte County, fourth-leading in Glenn County, third-leading in Shasta County and fifth-leading in Tehama County. Per the most recent annual crop reports, from 2022 production, this area known in

beekeeping as “the Golden Triangle” generated \$93 million. North Dakota is the top state in the nation for honey production, but the north state region raises 80% of the queen bees in the U.S. — satisfying the needs of hobbyists and professionals alike.

Local beekeepers also rent out hives to growers of crops that require pollination. Not only is that a boost financially, the almond orchards and farms with flowering plans provide forage for bees whose populations have suffered from pesticides as well as herbicides impacting habitats.

Outreach is important. Yvonne Koehnen founded the Honeybee Discovery Center in Orland to promote pollinators via exhibits and educational events, such as a Saturday morning workshop May 4 at Chico State University Farm with Ward and Hightower as presenters.

## **Evolutions**

Like Ward, the Koehens also took a winding road to their place on Highway 45. Carl Koehnen left San Diego for Stockton and launched a commercial catfish venture with his brother Albert. As described by Bill Koehnen, Carl’s oldest son and the family’s current patriarch, his father and uncle “shook hands in partnership” in 1907. Robust at first, business cooled, as did the brothers’ relationship, but both wound up in the north state — Albert in Live Oak, Carl in Ord Bend — and shifted from fish to bees.

“They saw flowers everywhere,” Bill explained, and loved honey they got from a man along the river in Stockton, “so they became really big beekeepers.”

Camping on a nearby property, Carl built a warehouse in 1927 and house in 1928 on land that still holds the family’s headquarters. Yvonne, widow of Carl’s son Bob, continues to sew beekeeping veils and sleeves for each employee. Sons of both Bill and Bob oversee the family’s beekeeping and farming operations. Reed Koehnen, son of Kamron (Bill’s nephew) and wife Julie, represents the fourth generation.

The area offers various types of forage for the bees they raise — including a species

other farmers see as invasive, star thistle, which Yvonne says “makes the best honey in the world.” That said, packaging bees became the apiary’s bread and butter, at one point supplying 90% of the queens in Canada.

Then came the parasites. Varroa mites and tracheal mites decimated colonies and prompted Canadian authorities to halt imports from the U.S. in the late ‘80s. Apiaries needed to adapt to counter the threat to their bees and their businesses; in fact, beekeepers still check larvae from their hive boxes for telltale signs of infestation.

Compounding the challenge, neighboring farmers began shifting from row crops to tree crops, with the introduction of chemicals that further hurt bees.

“Around where we’re trying to do all this, it’s gotten more and more difficult,” Kamron said. “Everything’s changed.”

Indeed, Hightower affirmed, “we’ve had some rough go’s” — and Ward added, “It’s a roller coaster ride, as is all of agriculture. If you can’t ride the wave, hop off and do something different, because you won’t like it. Some things are out of your control ... and it’s the same for everybody.”

Tough times brought beekeepers together. Individual apiaries do things differently yet don’t hesitate to share what others might consider trade secrets. Their innovations spread: Koehnen and Sons, for instance, adapted a forklift to better relocate hive boxes and invented a device for carrying queens that’s become an industry standard.

“The guys who couldn’t roll with it and change, mainly with the mites, are now no longer in the business,” Hightower said. “The fellows who were able to adapt and experiment are still here.”