

Little Momma

Walt Wright

My mother's family of German descent were great story tellers. A story that pushed the limits of believability was called a "yarn." With the escapades of nine brothers and sisters, there was no shortage of yarns, but the favorites were often retold at family gatherings. The consistency of the telling added some credibility to the most outrageous.

Mr. Flottum tells me that the "big boys" of beekeeping don't have time in the Summer months to read their magazines. That gives me the opportunity to inject a yarn that is marginally informative. This yarn, and other possible selections, will be those that have some potential for a useful moral or lesson. The most outrageous on my list is about a 17-queen swarm, but no lesson is seen in that one and will not likely invite your suspicions of my truthfulness.

Little Momma was a smallish queen hived with a very small swarm. She was not much larger than the queen you receive in the cage from the queen sources. The swarm wouldn't fill a medium baseball cap. Together, their chances for survival were very bleak. They appeared late in the Spring flow at a strong outyard of 12 colonies on the opposite side of the logging road access. They were hived directly below the limb where they settled. To say Little Momma and her crew had a bleak prospect of survival is an understatement. In this area, with a "split season", there are at least two months in mid Summer when field forage is iffy, at best. This tiny swarm didn't have chance.

The late wife Shirley helped me in my rounds at the time. She had a soft spot for struggling colonies, and was not going to let Little Momma and her gang perish. When we had rippled through the strong colonies for whatever the mission of the day, she had to check on Little Momma. She would pilfer a frame of honey, brood, or pollen to support the swarm survival. Her efforts were successful in helping them through the Summer doldrums, but they didn't grow much. In the Fall they hadn't filled their deep with comb. And Little Momma was still smallish. The colony had not increased the demand for eggs to

Most yarns have a moral, and a lesson. This has both.

a level that would cause her to increase in size. Shirley gave them a few shallow frames of honey over-head and wished them well for Winter.

This story has a happy ending, but let me digress for a minute. Early in my beekeeping there was an article about misapplication of your time. The writer contended that you must get tough to avoid spending a large amount of your time on items that produce the least returns for time spent. I don't remember the exact ratio, but it was something like spending 80% of your time on 20% of your bees. The 20% are those you pet, pamper, or baby through a crisis with questionable success. The writer recommended you get tough enough to write those feeble colonies off, and apply that time to the colonies that would provide the most return for time spent. It's easy to see the sense to that recommendation but difficult to do. If you care about

the little devils, you naturally want to help. It took me perhaps eight years to get tough enough to shake out a colony of laying workers in front of colonies that could use some extra bee power. If I knew where to look, I would be happy to give credit to the writer for his opinion.

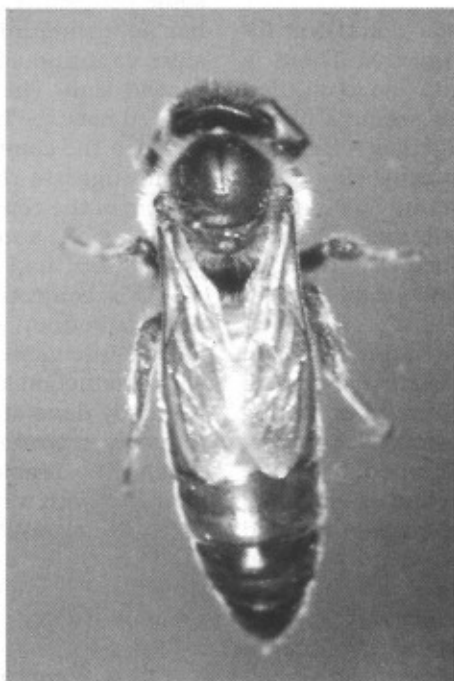
The mention of laying workers gives rise to another diversion to this yarn. We'll get back to Little Momma in yet another minute. Promise.

A laying worker colony was successfully resurrected by the following procedure. At weekly intervals, a frame of capped brood and a frame of eggs and larvae were taken from another colony in that outyard. They were exchanged for two frames of laying worker brood in the queenless colony. The literature reports that brood inhibits laying workers. The donor colony, receiving some drone brood in worker cells is not going to be hurt by a few dwarf drones. The

receiving laying worker colony maintains strength from the supplemental brood added.

On the third or fourth installment of eggs and brood, the laying worker colony started a queen cell and re-queened themselves. This approach was only tried once and cannot be recommended as a cure all. If your time is cheap, you might try it and see if it works for you.

Back to Little Momma: In February, a colony in another outyard was found to be queenless. They had a good cluster size but no brood. With a queen, they had the potential for being a producer that season. Queens are not normally available at that point in the season from stateside sources. Perhaps Little Momma would tide them over until a replacement queen would be available. Without much confidence in the results, Little Momma and crew (down to two frames of bees at that point) were newspapered on the queenless colony.



Tip Of The Month

Acquire a small bubble level to add to your bee tool caddy. Especially on sloped terrain, your eye cannot be trusted. The reference is tilted. Use the bubble level to deliberately elevate the rear of hives to insure bottom board drainage.

The next time I saw her, she was magnificent. Dark colored, so that there was no doubt it was Little Momma, herself, she actually sparkled in the sun. She radiated good health and purpose. Large and majestic, she had become the reigning monarch of #5, outyard #6. A replacement wasn't ordered, and #5 equaled production of others in that outyard that had a better start.

The moral of this yarn is that seeing the queen does not help you much. She is at the mercy of her support troops. Although she is the repository for the genetics of her offspring, extenuating circumstances, like field forage availability can impact the best genetics. The literature is big on inspection of the queen and brood patterns. I find that a waste of time.

A queen is seen occasionally, but I don't look for her. Queens look pretty much like queens. There is more information contained in the comb she is on than her appearance. I don't remember ever seeing a queen whose appearance caused concern. Further, excepting laying worker comb, I don't ever remember seeing brood patterns bad enough to get my attention. Some of my good fortune with queens could be attributed to annual supersedure. A supersedure queen from a strong colony is the best you can get. She is better quality than the best store-bought model.

The workers typically will sense a queen problem long before it will be obvious on periodic inspection. If they sense a problem and start supersedure, your rooting around in the brood nest can interfere in that process. Then you do have a problem. Inspect for brood. If you see worker brood of any age, you know you had a functional queen three weeks earlier. Open brood cuts that period into less than half. You don't need to see the queen. And what do you know when you see her? I've looked into quite a few colonies in my time, and have yet to see a problem that the bees did not have corrective action in process. Mite problems are an exception. They haven't learned to cope yet.

Example: Pulled out a brood frame where the outside

band of capped brood had an occasional drone capping. Their queen was running out of juice. The next band outside was empty cells. This told me that the colony had the problem in hand and were superseding. I backed out gently and let them do it their way. Supersedure was completed without interference.

My hive management approach is oriented to getting the most production with the least time and effort possible. If you have time to burn, by all means, learn as much as you can – and pay the penalty in colony disruption.

An off-line lesson of this yarn concerns the queenless colony that brought Little Momma to *Her Majesty* status. At that time on my learning curve, most of my wintering losses were from queenlessness. In a season where 6 of 130 were queenless in February it was noted that some were slightly tilted backward. The propolized bottom board would collect and retain a puddle of frigid water over the Winter. Ice might be less damaging, but frigid water would chill the clumsy queen instantly, and the workers are powerless to save her.

Add to the above scenario another observation and some conjecture. The wild colony nest in a tree hollow has no "communication holes." Comb is anchored at the sides continuously from top to bottom, and the comb is a solid slab. The wintering brood nest is conveniently located near the bottom of the comb where a space is left between the comb and the cavity bottom. This arrangement suggests that the queen is escorted around the bottom of the comb to get to the other side. She wouldn't have to make a major mistake to find herself in the cold puddle less than a half-inch away.

This conjecture is supported by results. Insuring positive bottom board drainage was incorporated in the Fall maintenance checks. Hive stands sometimes settle with production loads, and need to be checked annually. Normally done at the same time as installation of entry reducers, a bucket of shim stock does not slow progress much. The problem of overwinter queen loss virtually vanished with incorporation of the precautionary effort.

It seems that the art of yarn spinning is not a heritable trait. Uncle Dody or Uncle Monk would have made this yarn interesting, if not entertaining. I'll have to practice. **BC**

Walt Wright is a retired engineer and a hobby beekeeper in Tennessee. He is a frequent contributor to these pages.