

Honey Bees

by Gene Hickman



Apis mellifera

A while back I was listening to and critiquing a presentation by a Lewis & Clark interpreter. He was telling how the expedition brought candle molds with them and when they ran out of bees wax they were able to gather it [and honey] along the way to replenish their candles. This is not the first time I have heard this from L&C Interpreters and in Mountain Man presentations too. There are a couple of points I want to illustrate here: (1) There were no honey bees much before settlement. (2) The interpreter is adding undocumented information about what they did, and starting or perpetuating an “untruth.”

Honeybees probably originated in Tropical Africa and spread from South Africa to Northern Europe and East into India and China. They were brought to the Americas with the first colonists and are now distributed world-wide. Many Indians called honeybees “whiteman’s flies”. The first record of the introduction of honey bees to the western hemisphere was in 1530 in South America. Tradition usually says that bees were introduced to North America by colonists from Holland in 1638. However, there is also information indicating that colonies of honey bees were shipped from England and landed in the Colony of Virginia early in 1622. One or more shipments were made to Massachusetts between 1630 and 1633, others probably between 1633 and 1638 (Ortel, 1976). Since bees use a broad range of plants they have become widely dispersed and are now found throughout the world. Generally the honey bees spread across North America at about the same rate and at times a little ahead of white settlement in each new area.

Here are some more places and dates for honeybees. Remember these were semi-captives bees and were not usually just released into the wild. The bees had the capacity to do that themselves. Connecticut, 1644; New York (Long Island), 1670; Pennsylvania, 1698; North Carolina, 1730; Georgia, 1743; Alabama (Mobile), 1773; Mississippi (Natchez), 1770; Kentucky, 1780; Ohio, 1788; and Illinois, 1820 (Oertel 1976). By 1800, honey bees were fairly well distributed from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River.

Lewis June 10, 1805 ...*there are no bees in this country, nor have we met with a honey bee since we passed the entrance of the <Osage> [NB: Kansas] river* (Moulten, 1995).— Its western limit in 1804 would probably be closer to the Osage River than to the Kansas as Biddle amended the journal(s) for publication. It was also probably Biddle who drew a red vertical line through this passage about...the honey bee in the journals (Werner, et al, 1982)..

Lewis in summarizing his zoology on May 30, 1806 while with visiting Nez Perce Indians and finishing a new canoe to cross the Clearwater River, ...*the honey bee is not found here* (Moulten, 1995).

Clark mentions that when he was going up river he saw honeybees as high up as the Osage river and then on the return he saw them near the Kansas in trees. He also mentions that honeybees were introduced into Kentucky by settlers and that there were none in Illinois when the French settled there (Jackson, 1978).

Honey bees may have been taken to Alaska in 1809 and to California in 1830 by the Russians, according to Pellett (1938), but no records are available as to whether they survived. In the 1850's, bees were shipped from the Eastern States to California. A few hives were taken over land, but most of the hives were sent by ship to Panama, by land across the Isthmus, and then by

ship to California. Probably, the bees reached Oregon and Washington from California in natural swarms or in hives taken there by settlers. There are no dependable records that describe how bees spread westward from the Mississippi River into the Mountain States. It seems likely, however, that bees moved into these areas the same way they did into Oregon and Washington; that is, in natural swarms or in hives carried by the early settlers.