

Interview with Betty Menucci, RI's Pioneering Woman Beekeeper and Director of the RIBA Bee School

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I sat down with Betty Menucci one afternoon after a RIBA monthly meeting and followed up in a long phone interview to learn more about Rhode Island's pioneering woman beekeeper. The daughter of Frank and Mabel Hopkins, Betty's father kept 10 hives in the town of Burrillville in northern Rhode Island. She had little interest in beekeeping when her father died unexpectedly on Thanksgiving Day in 1987 leaving no one in the family knowledgeable about bees. It was either learn beekeeping or discard her father's legacy, so Betty stepped in. She took a RIBA course taught by Charlie McKeller in 1988 and got started in beekeeping through study and practice and the advice of experienced beekeepers, like most new beekeepers. She named her beekeeping operation "Betty's Bee Farm" for her honey and hive products, a brand that she continues to this day. She increased her father's hives to 20 and for years never had to purchase a package of bees relying on natural increase and splits.



However, Betty reports that it was a turning point when she took a short course at the Eastern Apiculture Society (EAS) in 1988 when it met at Mt. Holyoke College in Massachusetts. She learned scientific beekeeping and has been attending the EAS meetings every year since. Through this knowledge she has had much practical benefit, including recognizing and preventing a foulbrood outbreak. "In those days there was no varroa or tracheal mites she noted. She began to hear about "the mites" at EAS meetings which were discussed in association with increasing concerns about pesticides. But the varroa mite did not really "arrive" in RI until the mid 1990s. She was careful not to purchase packages and only bought queen replacements from Hawaii (since Hawaii did not have mites then). Betty offered high praise for the learning experience that EAS represents and encourages RIBA members to take advantage of next year's annual EAS meeting in Rhode Island. She and her mother have attended EAS every year leaving 3-5 days early to make a vacation out of the trip. EAS conferences have brought them as far south as Georgia, as far west as Ohio and as far north as Ontario and most of the states in between. To cut down on expenses they camp in the back of Betty's pickup truck.

A Pioneering Woman Beekeeper and Bee School Director

When Betty came into beekeeping she observed that it was dominated by older men, mostly recent retirees from all over the state. "There were few women beekeepers," a marked change from today when men of all ages and increasing numbers of women have taken up beekeeping. Betty became active in RIBA and was president for four years—1993-1997—a time, she told me, of declining beekeeping. It was a dying art because very few young people wanted to learn the art of beekeeping. When the mites first came, many beekeepers quit when they lost bees and did not want to treat their hives or deal with heavy losses. At times, RIBA meetings had only 5 or 10 people present. After her presidency when Roger Robitaille and Kit Myers became RIBA presidents, there was an uptick in the numbers with 30-50 people coming to a meeting, and the trend has continued with the subsequent presidents when 60-75 people might attend a monthly meeting and there are over 500 members of RIBA in RI and neighboring states

In the early 1990s Betty agreed to help with the Bee School and was handed a small packet of materials from the previous instructor. Instead of helping with the school, she found herself in charge of the whole thing. She rewrote the curriculum and extended the class from 4 weeks to 5 weeks. Her first Bee School had about 15-20 students and they met in the RI Mental Health Center near the ACI. The next several years the school was held in the RIBA Headquarters in East Greenwich (Yes, RIBA had a headquarters in those days). Since

Betty was a computer technology teacher at the William M. Davies Career and Technical High School, the school offered its location in Lincoln as a Bee School site and it has remained there ever since with Betty as chief educator and with classes that have swelled to the maximum capacity of 80 each spring. One of her former students, Paul Whewell has been assisting her in the class for about the last 8 years. Under Betty's supervision and instruction the Bee School has had a major impact on beekeeping in RI, with a likely majority of new beekeepers in the state getting their start with RIBA and Betty as an instructor (myself included). Because of the increased demand to take the class, a new Bee School was opened in South County and is taught by Mark Robar, RIBA president and Lou Chasse, vice president. Last year a third school was added and taught by former president Everett Zurlindin. Like few other beekeepers in the state, Betty can take the long view of both the sharp rise in beekeeping as well as the plight of the bees. She credits concern for the environment, the popularity of natural foods, locally produced, for the growing popularity of beekeeping, not only in RI but throughout the country. "The same folks who might want to have their own chickens, but can't in RI, may turn to bees," she said.

Bee Videographer and Commitment to Public Education

Besides being a RIBA educator, Betty has a commitment to public education through the media as well. Her video "Betty's Bees and Spring Flowers" won the "Best Video" at the 1991 EAS meeting held in New Bern, North Carolina, and has won a number of ribbons for her still photography entries at EAS throughout the years. She has also been a featured speaker at just about every garden club in RI and has also spoken about bees and beekeeping before Rotary Clubs, Granges, and public schools throughout RI and in neighboring Massachusetts. "Public education is a great mission for us in RIBA," she remarked, and Betty is an exemplary member of our state organization in this respect.



Betty's award-winning photos at EAS

Looking to the future, Betty says that she will stay in beekeeping as a lifelong pursuit. She enjoys all phases of beekeeping and appreciates it as a way to spend time outdoors, observe nature, the changing seasons and the flowers in bloom.

"Betty's Bee Farm" boasts a wide variety of products including honey, comb honey, creamed honey, beeswax soap, beeswax hand cream and novelty beeswax candles. Mostly she sells privately, but a few items are sold at health food stores in Smithfield and Cumberland. Betty handles the entire beekeeping operation alone with the exception of receiving help from her husband, Carlo at harvest time. He is in charge of setting up the extractor, turning the switch on and off as needed and washes it afterwards. He also puts the lids on the jars during bottling. She uses the Honey House her father built for extracting and also to store all her equipment.

Besides her exceptional service to RIBA as past president and current Bee School Director, Betty is also President of the Burrillville Historical Society where she also educates, presides over fundraising and produces the newsletter. Betty and her husband, Carlo produce historical videos and have produced documentaries on the towns of Burrillville and Glocester and the village of Manville. They have also produced a few videos to promote EAS in the past. Modest by nature, Betty is unlikely to toot her own horn, so it has been a pleasure to perform this role on her behalf and salute RI's pioneering woman beekeeper and RIBA educator extraordinaire.