



# THE BEEYARD AIN'T NO PLACE FOR A WOMAN FEMALE BEEKEEPERS OF GREY AND BRUCE

BY KELLY ROGERS

THIS PHOTO: DIANA RAE, RAE'S HONEY,  
HOLLAND CENTRE, 800 HIVES, APPLE  
POLLINATION AND HONEY PRODUCTION.

PHOTO BY GLEN RAE



**“THE BEEYARD AIN’T NO PLACE FOR A WOMAN.”** With those encouraging words, I began my beekeeping career after a stint at the University of Guelph bee lab. It was the mid 80s, in the beekeeping mecca of Peace River in northern Alberta, and the speaker was Neal, an agricultural exchange worker from Tasmania. If Australia was known for its macho image, Tasmania was even further ‘down under’ in its attitudes towards women. I certainly felt I had to prove myself, and always tried to keep up with the guys, driving the forklift with the best of them (or so I liked to think), and lifting heavy honey supers that I probably shouldn’t have. Looking back, I give full credit to my beekeeping boss, John, who went out on a limb giving a girl a job in the beeyard in the face of possible revolt from his crew.

Neal eventually, though grudgingly, accepted my presence. It wasn’t only the fact that he thought women physically incapable (he actually worried that I might “twist my womb”); I suspect he also resented a woman interrupting the easy camaraderie of the all-male field crew. I have to say that’s one of the things I most enjoyed (and still do) – although the beeyard and the camaraderie are no longer exclusive to men. There’s nothing like a day in the beeyards: the easy banter in the bee truck; discussing the best way to do this or that; solving the world’s problems; and enjoying the quiet of the great outdoors when everyone is hard at work, immersed in their hives.

I went on to have three beautiful children, balancing (not always successfully) a busy bee business with a rich home life. Neal, wherever life may have taken him, can rest assured that a woman’s reproductive capabilities are not forever compromised by a little bit of hard work.

Fast forward 30 years to Grey and Bruce Counties in Southwestern Ontario, an area with many commercial beekeepers; some may be surprised to learn just how many of those beekeepers are women. Some operations are run solely by women, others (like mine) are a family partnership with the female playing an equal role in the beekeeping end of the business.

Diana Rae also began beekeeping in the 1980s. She married into one of the big beekeeping families in Grey County. Although initially at home with their three children, she elbowed her way into the beeyard when the business was short-staffed, despite the fact that her partner was initially blind to the possibility. “At the time, men were very protective of their space and had an attitude that women couldn’t do it,” Diana recalls. “I always wanted to do what the guys did, and I worked my ass off to show them I could.” She describes herself as fiercely independent and continues to be the spark behind Rae’s Honey (800 hives), juggling all hats when necessary.

You can’t talk about beekeepers in Grey County without Carmenie Stemmler’s name coming up. “I was a little hesitant about being a woman in what has traditionally been considered a male-dominated occupation,” explains Jerri Parent, a five-year beekeeper with 70 hives near Wiarton. That was, until she met Carmenie.

Carmenie first became interested in bees while researching a school project in Grade 11, and it wasn’t long till she had her first four hives. She worked for us on and off for a few years. – I still remember one of her first days on the job. We were making splits in one of our shady yards where the colonies were always cranky, no matter how often they were requeened. Carmenie had a bee jacket on over her usual yellow T-shirt and jean skirt. I kept glancing over at her with concern, knowing the bees’ tendency to crawl upwards; but she continued to work diligently without complaint. She has since admitted laughingly that she received dozens of stings that day. Ouch! She hasn’t worn a skirt in the beeyard since.

“How many hives does Carmenie have now?” was the question on every male beekeeper’s lips for a few years. Perhaps threatened initially, they soon shook their heads in wonder as they headed home after a day in the beeyard only to see Carmenie just heading out to her northern yards, her truck piled high with supers. She currently runs 1,000 hives with her posse of mostly female helpers. Always generous with her time and knowledge, Carmenie has launched many beekeepers on



JERRI PARENT, BEE HAPPY HONEY, WIARTON. 70 HIVES, HONEY PRODUCTION. PHOTO BY MIKE SCHENK



GABRIELA BERGER, GEORGIAN BAY HONEY, OWEN SOUND (1,800 HIVES, QUEENS AND NUC, HONEY PRODUCTION). PHOTO BY GEOFF JENNEN



KELLY ROGERS, CHATSWORTH HONEY, CHATSWORTH. 700 HIVES, QUEENS AND NUCS, APPLE POLLINATION, HONEY PRODUCTION, MEMBER OF ORHBS. PHOTO BY PAUL KOZAK

their way, both male and female. Jerri considers Carmenie her mentor: “Carmenie showed me that it is possible to make smart choices that make the physical aspects of the work manageable.”

Gabriela Berger of Georgian Bay Honey originally trained as a pastry chef in Switzerland, although she came from a family of beekeepers. When her children were young, she bought a few nucs and quickly expanded to a few hundred hives. Gabriela juggled four young children and a queen breeding and nuc operation single-handed for many years. Today, she runs 1,800 hives with her partner and has recently built one of the biggest honey houses in the area. Along with a full-time employee, she enlists her entire family to help out during the busy season: parents, in-laws, and (now) five kids.

Judith, Diane, and Raquel are more women in Grey and Bruce who’ve been beekeeping full time for many years. Judith Perez, originally from Cuba, runs 200 hives near Durham. Diane Hills is the main beekeeper at Hills Honey near Tara, managing 500 hives. And Raquel Mijares Gonzáles, who has a honey bee research background from her homeland of Mexico, is quietly using her prodigious skills to build up a breeding program at Eccles Honey in south Grey. It is primarily female beekeepers who tend to look after queen rearing and progress to queen breeding. Perhaps women are more suited to it than their male counterparts. “It is a multifaceted job demanding patience and attention to detail, and women are simply better at multitasking,” explains Diane.

One of the biggest challenges for women is that beekeeping is labour intensive and physically demanding. Most women (and men, for that matter) use shallow- or medium-depth honey supers instead of deeps. It is possible to use three mediums instead of two deep boxes for the brood nest, although this precludes the sale of nucs and hives as the frame size is not consistent with industry norms. Narrow, or eight-frame, Langstroth equipment is another option that is easier to manage and becoming more widely available. Simple things can help, too, such as putting a stand behind your hive onto which you can shift the second brood chamber, without actually having to lift it. One must not be a slouch, though...it will always be hard physical work. Many of us do regular core strength exercises or practice yoga to keep strong and flexible (although this is highly recommended for any aging beekeeper, male or female).

Thankfully, beekeeping is a career with no fashion pressure, so we are amused to find that suddenly we’re at the height of fashion: big work boots and wooly work socks; T-shirts and plaid shirts; and ripped jeans (though ours got that way through hard work, not by design). Women rejoiced when two-piece bee suits became available in the 90s – no more worrying about peeing on your veil, or making sure all the bees



KELLY ROGERS, CHATSWORTH HONEY, CHATSWORTH.  
PHOTO BY LEVI BRUCE

are out before zipping back up. Not to mention the inconvenience of being out all day in the beeyards with only the big, wide woods as our bathroom. For us, it’s just another challenge to be surmounted.

We all agree that the benefits of being a beekeeper far outweigh the challenges: having autonomy; spending time out of doors; working in a multifaceted business that is never boring; and enjoying the camaraderie of fellow beekeepers. Most of all, it’s the satisfaction of hard work accomplished as you daub that paint dot on the back of the first fat, fertile queen of the season; fill that first golden jar of honey off the extracting line; or wrap the last beehive before the snow flies.

The beeyard is, indeed, a darn good place for a woman. 🐝





CARMENIE STEMMLER, GREY BRUCE BEEKEEPING SUPPLIES, WILLIAMSFORD. 1,000 HIVES, APPLE POLLINATION, QUEENS AND NUCS, HONEY PRODUCTION. PHOTO BY ROBBIN MCGREGOR

THANKFULLY, BEEKEEPING IS A CAREER WITH NO FASHION PRESSURE, SO WE ARE AMUSED TO FIND THAT SUDDENLY WE'RE AT THE HEIGHT OF FASHION: BIG WORK BOOTS AND WOOLY WORK SOCKS; T-SHIRTS AND PLAID SHIRTS; AND RIPPED JEANS (THOUGH OURS GOT THAT WAY THROUGH HARD WORK, NOT BY DESIGN).