

About the Nebraska Beekeepers Association: Chemical Free Beekeeping Conference November 21-23 of 2008 in Lincoln, Nebraska:

By Michael Bush

I didn't write an article on what happened at the Oracle conference this last February, not because I didn't think it noteworthy, but because Dean and Ramona wrote such a succinct, accurate and poetic description so quickly (see below). And I'm not trying to beat them to the punch this time, by any means, but I just wanted to jot down my observations while they are fresh in my mind. I hope they are doing the same. My presentations are on my web site. Just go down the left side of this page until you see "Presentations". Go down the left side of that one to "Chemical Free Beekeeping Conference" and you'll see them listed there.

The turnout was moderate. I had hoped for more, but I'd say, counting speakers it was probably near fifty people (I didn't do an actual count but 36 preregistered, plus a few registered at the door plus seven speakers). It got enthusiastic reviews from all the participants that I talked. The speakers were varied and while there was often a difference of opinions, there was much at the core that was the same. The need for local, strong queen stock and self sufficient operations where outside inputs, such as packages and queens, were not really needed ran throughout the presentations. Not only the possibility but the short and long term importance of not treating the bees became apparent. It was clear that at least at some level, all the speakers believe that treating is only breeding weak bees and disrupting the natural balance of the hive. There is no guarantee that I will get all these presentation titles correct, nor the order correct as it's a bit of a blur right now. There was so much information being presented and it was so concentrated that I'm still digesting it and I'm bound to have things a little out of order and may even have overlooked something or someone.

The speakers were:

Dee Lusby

Michael Palmer

Laura Tyler

Ramona Herboldsheimer

Dean Stiglitz

Michael Bush

Friday afternoon started with me presenting "Natural cell size" and asking, and attempting to answer the question "does small cell=natural cell" and how do either of these affect Varroa in the hive.

Dee Lusby talked about the concept of the success of chemical free beekeeping being 1/3 comb (cell size, Housel positioning, clean wax etc.), 1/3 genetics (locally adapted survivor stock), 1/3 feed (only real pollen and real honey for feed). In her homespun "I'm just an old beekeeper's wife" style she presented complex concepts that some needed some time to absorb while laying the foundation for successful keeping of bees without artificial inputs. It is really enlightening, humbling and heartening to hear her wisdom distilled down from decades of, not only beekeeping, but small cell, chemical free beekeeping. Of course in all of her presentations there is her enthusiasm for the subject, underlying her expertise.

This was followed by the down home wisdom and extensive experience of Michael Palmer sharing how he chooses and raises queens. His method of rearing is similar to, but more simplified than some I've heard and, if I get time to think it through and set it up, I'd like to try it this spring. He also reiterated the importance of locally adapted stock that can survive. His knowledge and enthusiasm for his subject is infectious.

Corwin Bell, unfortunately, did not make it due to an illness and after asking the audience if they still wanted a top bar presentation I gave one on top bar/ horizontal hives. To help people see what they actually look like, Bill Lily brought two of them in the next day to show, one Kenya Top Bar Hive and one Horizontal hive.

Saturday started off with Dee talking about hive management including how to "pyramid up" to work the bees up and back down throughout the year and many other aspects of her methods and view of beekeeping. Since most of her

writings available on Beesource in the POV are to do with small cell, clearing up contamination, genetics etc., it was great to see more on her management.

I knew that Ramona Herboldsheimer had a lot of information that we needed to hear about microbes in the hive and so we allocated extra time for her. She really outdid herself. I need to get the references now and look up the studies. I had been aware of the concept but only as a few specifically well known (but usually ignored) relationships such as Chalkbrood fungus preventing EFB; stonebrood fungus preventing Nosema; and Yeasts and bacteria helping to digest the pollen. I had always figured the gut microbes helped with things like Nosema. But when she started talking about not only that these things were going on, but illustrating the extent of the importance of them to the day to day functioning of the hive, and not just their relationship to diseases, and the "heritability" of it being passed on to their swarms but how often those same beneficial microbes not being found in the hive next door, I had one of the paradigm shifts that disrupts your view of the world for a while. In this case I begin to see that the success or failure of a hive might be as related to the microbes it contains as it is to the genetics of the queen. This shouldn't be too surprising as I think every queen breeder has discovered that the feeding and development of the queen has much more to do with the success of a hive than the genetics and hives that are booming are often due to things such as drifting instead of genetics. But research that the microbes in the hive varied in the same yard from hive to hive was stunning in its implications.

Laura Tyler presented her movie "Sister Bee". This carefully, poetically crafted glimpse into the heart and soul of why people keep bees was a delight to me even though I've seen it several times. Besides I get to enjoy the reactions of the audience to it. Before this film, I had never seen a movie that even approaches getting across the spiritual undercurrent of beekeeping (that beekeepers often don't even talk about, or if they do they don't know how to express it) and "Sister Bee" was far beyond my expectations of what was even possible in that direction. I'm a pretty harsh movie critic, even of movies I like and even after the several times I've seen this one, I am hard pressed to find a single thing I'd change about it. The music is inspiring, the rhythm and flow of the movie never lets you get lulled into losing interest. There is this beautiful rhythm of contrasts that uses bits of old footage of beekeeping, with chronologically appropriate music to provide pace, comic relief and just the bare necessity of basic bee biology education to give a context to what the beekeepers in the film are saying; contrasted with the beauty, energy and serenity of the bees and the relationship that each of the beekeepers in the film has with them. The film does not in any way attempt to be a film about the natural history of bees or how to be a beekeeper, or make any other point which would have detracted from its core, and yet in subtle ways it does without trying to. Needless to say, if you didn't get the picture yet, I am a huge fan of this film. There is no "wasted motion" in it. Everything there is, in Lakota terms, "hecetu yelo" - "just right". Not too much, not too little. It is very subtle, and not at all preachy about anything. I think you should all write to your local public broadcasting stations and request it by name. You should also buy it and show it to your non-beekeeping friends. If nothing else it will give them a glimpse into the appeal of bees and beekeeping and a beekeeper's relationship to the bees, to replace their current opinion of you, now that they know you keep bees, which is probably either awe that you are so brave or the nagging suspicion that you are insane to want to work with millions of stinging insects.

After that Dean Stilgitz talked about his experiences regressing and going to natural comb. As you listen to him, you are struck by his intelligence, powers of observation and eloquence. His enthusiasm is obvious also and makes him a dynamic speaker. He talked about the methods he adopted and challenges in using them. I think it was very enlightening on so many subjects to hear so many people's personal experiences, and his eloquent and frank presentation of what he and his wife Ramona have done and the direction they are taking was inspiring. He also talked about how we need to come to the realization that we have a very valuable product and we need to educate our consumers as to what we are providing and not be shy about charging what it is worth.

I followed this with a presentation that did a quick review of the previous one on Natural Cell Size, and then picked up from there with more on how to actually regress bees and not lose them to the Varroa in the process.

Most of us then went to Dean and Ramona's hotel where the hotel management had graciously agreed to let us have a party and we had pizza, talked and then watched an awesome video on the interconnectedness of the fig wasp with the fig tree and many other organisms that are in that small part of the net of life. It was another reminder of how interconnected everything is and that was a reminder how interconnected honey bees are to everything around them as well. The fellowship of the party was a wonderful experience that is far too complicated to even attempt to describe

but I'm sure many of you have had similar nights of conversation with like-minded people.

Sunday we started the day with Michael Palmer presenting his method of overwintering nucs. It is a blessing to have his years of experiences as a head start to working out how to keep them here in our climate with our equipment. His presentation, as all of his were, was full of little "tips and tricks", down-home beekeeping wisdom and practical advice from out in the field. This was clearly a subject he strongly believes in, is very experienced with and one that Northern beekeepers need to get a grasp of.

This was followed by a demonstration where Dee used real boxes and frames (albeit mediums instead of deeps) to show how to work up bees by pyramiding them up. A lot of lights went on in a lot of heads when they could see it for themselves. Many people came up afterwards and said as much as well.

After that Michael Palmer gave a talk on how he manages his bees, again with many practical tips that have been perfected over decades of beekeeping in a Northern climate. Any one of them was probably worth far more than the mere price of admission for the conference.

This was followed by a very compressed version of my "Lazy Beekeeping" presentation which, while not a presentation of my management methods per se, is a presentation of some isolated techniques and changes in equipment I've made, including no chemicals and no artificial feed, that have simplified my life and saved me a lot of work. I really wanted to get the point across that chemical free beekeeping is not harder, it's easier and simpler.

After the official conference ended many of us went to my home beeyard and went through a few hives and a few nucs and hung out and talked as the bees buzzed all around us in the beeyard on a beautiful day. Michael Palmer went to catch his plane, others left and eventually the rest of us had supper and talked until the wee hours.

I want to say how grateful I am to all the speakers: Dee, Michael Palmer, Ramona, Dean, and Laura. This conference would not have been possible without them. This conference started from a plan to have Dee Lusby as a speaker for the Nebraska Beekeepers Association meeting and then grew into a three day conference and that was only possible with the generosity and effort of many people including those speakers, many of whom came on their own dime. The variety of speakers added greatly to our understanding of the bigger picture as well as keeping our interest during such an intense and concentrated three days. They all generously shared so much practical and sometimes revolutionary information that it was, at the same time, exciting and exhausting trying to absorb it all.

Thanks also, to all those who attended. Your questions, participation and enthusiasm not only improved the quality of the conference, but your hunger for knowledge, and your respectful participation is what makes it worth the while of the speakers to come to these kinds of meetings.

This was a bit more long winded than I intended but there was so much to comment on and so much I wanted to say that it was difficult to keep it this short. I can only say, quoting Blaise Pascal, "If I had more time, I would have written a shorter letter."