

Bee Line: How the Honey Bee Defined the American Frontier

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Before the 1630s, the domestic honey bee was unknown on the North American continent. The honey bee was one of the many invasive species brought to North America by the early European settlers, along with such commonplace species as dandelions and earthworms. Two hundred years later, honey bees had spread across the continent. To Native Americans, the honey bee became a harbinger of the arrival of the white man. To the settlers, bees became a marker of the frontier. Along the way, bees left their small mark on the literature of the American west—especially in the period between 1840 and 1860, when settlers were spreading across the flowering prairies of the Midwest.

Swarming: Bees as a Marker of the Frontier

The honey bee was recorded in Illinois as early as 1820, when the traveler John Woods observed settlers hunting for honey in hollow trees (349-350). Twelve years later, in 1832, William Cullen Bryant travelled to Illinois to visit his brother, who had emigrated there shortly after the death of their mother. On that visit, Bryant wrote his poem “The Prairies,” in which the honey bee evokes the arrival of white settlers on the prairie:

*The bee,
A more adventurous colonist than man,
Fills the savannas with his murmurings,
And hides his sweets, as in the golden age,
Within the hollow oak. I listen long
To his domestic hum, and think I hear
The sound of that advancing multitude
Which soon shall fill these deserts. From the ground
Comes up the laugh of children, the soft voice*

*Of maidens, and the sweet solemn hymn
Of Sabbath worshippers. The low of herds
Blends with the rustling of the heavy grain
Over the dark-brown furrows. All at once
A fresher wind sweeps by, and breaks my dream,
And I am in the wilderness alone (164-5).*

The honey bee is both an escapee from the hives of eastern civilization, and a harbinger of that civilization's imminent arrival on the frontier. The bee's "domestic hum" is associated with children and maidens, with the yielding of the wild-flowering prairie to the cultivated field. Both wild and domestic, the honey bee becomes the entomological marker of the frontier, drawing a bee-line between wilderness and civilization.

The settlers who arrived in the honey bee's wake associated themselves with bees even through the language they used for the activities of settlement. When settlers came together to build a house or raise a barn, it was a building bee or a raisin' bee. There were also "choppin' bees (to clear timber land or make a clearing), stone bees (to clear a piece of ground of stones), huskin' bees (to husk a corn crop for storage), and quiltin' bees (to make bed coverings)" (Babcock 141). In a sense, the honey bees and the settlers are one and the same, both industrious agents of domestication.

For Native Americans, on the other hand, the honey bee was a bad omen. As James Kirke Paulding wrote in 1818: "The honey bee is not a native of our forests. It precedes the caravan of White Settlers at no great distance, and when the Indians see a swarm, they say, 'It is time for us to go; the white man is coming'" (178).

Bryant calls the honeybee "a more adventurous colonist than man." The honeybee becomes a representative of what scholars have begun to call "settler colonialism" (Veracini, Hixson). Unlike colonialism, which establishes an exploitative relationship with indigenous populations, settler colonialism aims at eliminating and replacing indigenous populations. Settler colonists are invasive species, who overrun native habitat and, by their presence, alter it. The early European colonists in North America brought with them numerous species—honeybees, earthworms, dandelions, house sparrows, a host of infectious diseases—that became representatives of settler colonialism. The honeybee was known as the "white man's fly." Broad-leaf plantain was known as "white-man's footprint," the ox-eye daisy as "white-man's weed." Smallpox was "white-man's gift," because it came with the gift of inflected blankets. These organisms were more than metaphors for settler colonialism, they were its agents.

In his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1783), Thomas Jefferson confirms that "the honey bee is not a native of our continent." He continues: "The Indians concur with us in the tradition that it was brought from Europe; but when, and by whom, we know not. The bees have generally extended themselves into the country, a little in advance of the white settlers. The Indians therefore call them the white man's fly, and consider their approach as indicating the approach of the settlements of the whites" (Jefferson 71-2). Looking back at the settlement of Massachusetts, two or three generations after Jefferson was writing, Thoreau similarly saw the honey bee as "prophetic" of the fate of the Native Americans at the hands of white settlers. He wrote: "The honey bee hummed through the Massachusetts woods, and sipped the wild flowers round the Indian's wigwam, perchance unnoticed,

when, with prophetic warning, it stung the red child's hand, forerunner of that industrious tribe that was to come and pluck the wild flower of his race up by the root" (Thoreau 330).

Numerous accounts of American travelers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries trace the spread of the honey bee westward, always in advance of white settlement. The observation that the bee is an advance scout for the settlers becomes a commonplace in these accounts.

The European honey bee, *Apis mellifera mellifera*, was first introduced to the American colonies around the year 1638, and was firmly established in New England by about 1654 (Watkins; Sheppard). The type of bee first introduced was a German bee whose frequent swarming behavior made it possible to transport in the days before portable bee frames (which were not invented until the middle of the nineteenth century). The swarming behavior of the bees also accounts for their propensity to abandon their domestic hives and spread into the wild in advance of white settlement.

According to the naturalist William Bartram, who travelled in the Southeast from 1773 to 1777, there were no honey bees to be found at that time west of the Florida peninsula. He mentions the felling of a bee tree on a bluff above the St. John's River in eastern Florida, but further west on his travels he found no evidence of bees (193, 261). Lewis and Clark record in their Journals (May 30, 1806) that the "honey bee is not found" in the vicinity of their camp in what is now Idaho (Moulton 309). A few years later, the English traveler John Bradbury, who traveled through Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana and Tennessee between 1809 and 1811, asserts that honey bees were not found west of the Mississippi before 1797. He continues: "They are now found as high up the Missouri as the Maha [Omaha] nation, having moved westward to the distance of 600 miles in fourteen years. Their extraordinary progress in these parts is probably owing to a portion of the country being prairie, and yielding therefore a succession of flowers during the whole summer, which is not the case in forests. Bees have spread over this continent in a degree, and with a celerity so nearly corresponding with that of the Anglo-Americans, that it has given rise to a belief, both amongst the Indians and the Whites, that bees are their precursors, and that to whatever part they go the white people will follow" (58).

Edwin James, in his account of S.H. Long's expedition to the Rocky Mountains in 1819-1820, describes finding a swarm of bees in a cottonwood tree along the Arkansas River. He writes: "These useful insects reminded us of the comforts and luxuries of life among men, and at the same time gave us the assurance that we were drawing near the abodes of civilization. Bees, it is said by the hunters and the Indians, are rarely if ever seen more than two hundred and fifty or three hundred miles in advance of the white settlements" (160). Josiah Gregg, also travelling in Arkansas between 1831 and 1839, reports that the honey bee had advanced "to the distance of two or three hundred miles west of the Missouri and Arkansas frontier" (283).

With the advance of the honey bee came "bee hunters," such as the men observed by John Woods in Illinois, who tracked wild bees back and plundered their hives for honey and beeswax. When Davy Crockett began traveling across Texas in 1835, on a journey that would eventually lead to his death at the Alamo, his guide was a bee hunter (Crockett 276). Like the bees themselves, bee hunters arrived with the advance of the frontier, and came to have a particularly good knowledge of the land. In the reminiscences of "old settlers," collected at the end of the nineteenth century, bee hunters make frequent appearances—men like Ethan Newcom, of McLean County, Illinois, who "once took a thousand pounds of honey and sixty pounds of beeswax to Chicago in one load" (Duis 418). In Dodge

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County, Minnesota, Ab. Kelly "often had from fifty to a hundred trees marked in the woods" as bee trees. But as the writer observes: "The Kelly family did not long remain on the prairie. It was becoming too civilized and they soon pushed on" (*History of Winona, Olmsted, and Dodge Counties* 834).

The activities of bee hunters are described in some detail by several American authors of the first half of the nineteenth century. Paul Hover, in James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Prairie* (1827), is one of the earliest examples of a bee hunter in American literature. Another early description of a bee hunt is appears in Washington Irving's *A Tour of the Prairies* (1835), an account of a visit to the prairies of Oklahoma in October and November, 1832. Irving begins his account of the bee hunt with the commonplace about honey bees serving as advance scouts of white settlement:

The Indians consider them the harbinger of the white man, as the Buffalo is of the red man; and say that, in proportion as the bee advances, the Indian and Buffalo retire. We are always accustomed to associate the hum of the bee hive with the farm house and the flower garden, and to consider those industrious little animals as connected with the busy haunts of man, and I am told that the wild bee is seldom to be met with at any great distance from the frontier. (29)

The account proceeds to give a description of the bee hunt itself. A piece of honeycomb is set out as bait to attract bees; when a bee arrives to take the bait, the bee hunters follow its "bee-line" back to the hollow tree where its hive is located; the tree is felled; the bees are smoked out of the tree with "a whisp of lighted hay" and the honey is removed from the tree (30-1). This description is similar to other descriptions of bee hunts that make their way into American literature in the first half of the nineteenth century, from Sylvester Judd's novel *Margaret* (1845) to Thomas Bangs Thorpe's sketch "Tom Owen, The Bee-Hunter" (1854). After Thorpe, the bee hunter vanishes from American literature. Thorpe explains: "As a country becomes cleared up and settled, bee-hunters disappear" (47).

Hiving: Bees and Property Rights

In his account of the bee hunt, Washington Irving also gives a full description of the aftermath of the hunt, dwelling on the plunder of the bee tree not only by the hunters, but by other bees: "Nor was it the bee hunters alone that profited by the downfall of this industrious community; as if the bees would carry through the similitude of their habits with those of laborious and gainful man, I beheld numbers from rival hives, arriving on eager wing, to enrich themselves with the ruins of their neighbors" (31). The displaced bees from the ruined hive are only able to "contemplate the prostrate ruin and to buzz forth doleful lamentations over the downfall of their republic" (31-2). An account that begins with the displacement of Native Americans and bison by white men and bees, ends with the bees themselves plundering and displacing other bees. Both the bee hunters and bees from "rival hives" enrich themselves on the labors of others.

These issues—particularly the issue of property rights raised by the plundering of a bee tree—are developed in more depth in Caroline M. Kirkland's "The Bee-Tree," a sketch from *Western Clearings* (1845). The story concerns Silas Ashburn, a rather shiftless Michigan settler who lives primarily by hunting and who attributes his lack of prosperity to "bad luck" rather than to what more respectable citizens see as his laziness. On his way one morning to clear timber for a wealthier neighbor, Silas happens to come across a bee tree and quickly abandons his paying job in order to mark the tree so

he can return for its easily acquired honey. We know from Crèvecoeur that proper procedure upon finding a bee tree in the woods is to mark it and, before cutting it down, "to inform the proprietor of the land, who is entitled to half its contents" (34). Silas, however, plans to take the tree for himself without informing the landowner. When he returns, however, the landowner has felled the tree and hauled it away.

Kirkland's story sets up a hierarchy of rights. When Silas first comes across the bee tree, he notices signs that Native Americans have made a preliminary attempt to harvest the honey. He says to his son: "If they'd had axes to cut down the big tree, they wouldn't have left a smitchin o' honey, they're such tarnal thieves." Kirkland then observes: "Mr. Ashburn's ideas of morality were much shocked at the thought of the dishonesty of the Indians, who, as is well known, have no rights of any kind; but considering himself as first finder, the lawful proprietor of this much-coveted treasure, gained too without the trouble of a protracted search, or the usual amount of baiting, and burning of honeycombs, he lost no time in taking possession after the established mode" (71). In the end, however, it is the property owner who asserts the ultimate right to take possession of the bee tree. The Native American is trumped by the frontiersman, the frontiersman by the property owner. The Native Americans "have no rights of any kind."

James Fenimore Cooper acknowledges a similar hierarchy of property rights in his political tract *The American Democrat* (1838). Cooper begins his discussion of property by saying that "property is the base of all civilization" (135). He argues that the rights of property have some basis in nature, since "even insects, reptiles, beasts and birds have their several possessions, in their nests, dens, and supplies" (136). At the lowest level of the hierarchy of property rights, then, is nature itself. Next come "savage" and "semi-barbarous" peoples. Cooper writes: "The rights of property become artificial and extended, as society becomes civilized. In the savage state, the land is without owners, property consisting in the hut, the food, and the arms used in war and in the chase. In pastoral, or semi-barbarous states, use gives claims, not to individuals, but to tribes, and flocks are pastured on grounds that belong to one entire community" (136). The most advanced state of civilization, in Cooper's formulation, is that in which the rights of private ownership by individuals is universally recognized.

The issue of property rights is raised again in Cooper's *The Oak Openings; or, The Bee-Hunter* (1848). Here, Cooper argues that the idea of property may not in fact be implanted in human beings by nature, but it is nonetheless closely "interwoven with those [rights] that are derived from nature." He writes: "It is certain that all we have of civilization is dependent on a just protection of this right; for, without the assurance of enjoying his earnings, who would produce beyond the supply necessary for his own immediate wants?" Cooper goes on to say that "among the American savages the rights of property are distinctly recognized." When the bee hunter, le Bourdon, fells a honey tree, Cooper observes: "So sacred is this right held to be, that not one of those [Indians] who stood by, and saw le Bourdon fell his tree, and who witnessed the operation of bringing to light its stores of honey, appeared to dream of meddling with the delicious store, until invited so to do by its lawful owner" (341).

The right of property is essential, according to Cooper, because it provides a man with "the assurance of enjoying his earnings." It provides an assurance that men will live off their own labor and not the labor of others. They will not take what belongs to others. The white bee-hunter, however, makes

his living precisely by exploiting the labor of others, by plundering the hives of bees. As the Native Americans watch the bee-hunter go about his business, it occurs to them that their people could be in the same position as the bees: "Could the pale-faces compel bees to reveal the secret of their hives, and was that encroaching race about to drive all the insects from the woods and seize their honey, as they drove the Indians before them and seized their lands?" (313-14). It is the Native Americans, not the whites, who are portrayed as the true respecters of the rights of property. Indeed, Margery, the bee-hunter's fiancée, gains the protection of the murderous "Scalping Peter" when she unaffectedly proclaims her belief in the Indian's right to the land: "The red man has a good right—nay, he has a *better* right to this country than we whites; and God forbid that he should not always have his full share of the land!" (333).

In a final chapter of *The Oak Openings* set in 1848, Cooper himself makes a trip to Michigan to visit the scene of his novel, the main action of which was set in the area around Kalamazoo thirty-six years earlier. On the train, he meets Margery and "Scalping Peter" himself, now a respectable old convert to Christianity. Cooper asks Peter, "Do you, then, look on us pale-faces as having a right here? Do you not regard us as invaders, as enemies who have come to take away your lands?" Peter replies: "Injin don't own 'arth. 'Arth belong to God, and he send whom he likes to live on it. One time he send Injin; now he send pale-face. *His* 'arth, and he do what he please wid it" (495).

This shift in attitude in Cooper's novel—from an assertion of the Native American's better right to the land to an assertion that the land is God's to dispose as he pleases—reflects an actual shift in attitudes, and in the law itself, between the end of the Revolution and the 1820s. In those thirty years, the law shifted from recognizing Native American ownership of their tribal land to claiming that Indians were mere *occupants* of the land without rights of ownership (Banner 150). The shift came about in large part through an elision of the prominent role of agriculture in Native American life, and the promotion of an erroneous claim that Native Americans were primarily nomadic hunters. The "erasure of Indian agriculture" (Banner 154) allowed lawyers and legislators to claim possession of Indian land for white settlers based on the Lockean argument that cultivation was the basis of ownership. Congressman Richard Henry Wilde, for example, argued for the removal of the Cherokee from Georgia in 1830 by evoking both Locke and "the divine law":

The earth...was given to man for his inheritance, and was destined by the Creator to sustain the greatest portion. It was originally common, and appropriated by use and cultivation. All the colonies adopted these principles; they recognized a title in the Indians to those lands only which they had subdued and cultivated, but never imagined that the savage had a natural right to exclude his fellow man from all that he roamed over in the chase (5).

Wilde's formulation of the argument is fairly representative of the consensus among westward-looking Americans of the early- to mid-nineteenth century.

The bee hunter is closer to the stereotype of the nomadic Native American hunter than to the white farmer. In Caroline Kirkland's "The Bee-Tree," Silas Ashburn has built a small cabin for himself and his family, but he subsists on hunting rather than on farming. Kirkland remarks that Ashburn's neighbor John Dean "has made more money splitting rails in the winter" than Ashburn has made through

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hunting deer (67). Splitting rails implies enclosure of the land—an "improvement" associated with agriculture and ownership—and stands diametrically opposed to the nomadic activity of hunting.

In the end, Ashburn pulls up stakes and heads for Wisconsin. The hunter, like the wild bees he hunts, moves further west with the advance of the frontier.

In his wake came farmers with their hives: collecting honey became an agricultural activity rather than a pursuit for hunters. In the 1830s, the agricultural journals in New England were full of articles about beekeeping and advertisements for patented bee hives. By the 1850s, similar articles and advertisements were appearing in the agricultural publications of Ohio and Michigan—including advertisements for the revolutionary moveable frame hive patented by L.L. Langstroth in 1852. In 1853, Henry Hiram Riley, writing under his pseudonym "Simon Oakleaf," published a sketch in *The Knickerbocker* about a bee hunt in the vicinity of "Puddleford," a fictional village based on Constantine, Michigan. Six years later, in 1859, an enterprising farmer in Burr Oak—twenty miles east of Constantine—was advertising Langstroth moveable frame hives for sale in *Michigan Farmer*.

Often the shift from bee hunting to beekeeping was marked within a single family, like the Stansbury family of Thompson Township in Iowa: William Stansbury was a bee hunter, his son Isaac bought hives (*History of Guthrie and Adair Counties* 236-237).

The shift from bee hunting to beekeeping is perhaps best and most humorously illustrated in a sketch that appeared in the sporting magazine *Spirit of the Times* in 1854. In the sketch, an old bee hunter known as "Leather Stockings" and a companion follow a bee line over miles of rugged wilderness, tracking the bee back to its bee tree:

At length they emerged from the woods into the open fields, and soon got pretty near a farmhouse; and in a few moments entered the dooryard. "Leather Stockings" paused a bit at the gate, looking over his shoulder rather comically at his half-exhausted companion.

"Where to next, pray?" exclaimed the straggler.

"Just there," replied the old gentleman, pointing to a lot of bee hives snugly ensconced with a shed near the house.

The story concludes with the observation that, of course, "they had no claim to the honey."

In the two hundred years since their introduction to North America, honey bees spread across the continent, helping to define the American frontier and to mark the transition from hunting to settled agriculture. This history is reflected in the accounts of travelers and old settlers, and in the literary sketches and novels that came out of American westward expansion. The story they tell is of the rapid passing of a way of life, as Native Americans and white backwoodsmen—the bee hunters—give way to farmers, the wild lands of the west are transformed into private property, and the wild bees are redomesticated to the hive.

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