

How the Honeybee Came to California

Written by Gail Fretwell-Hugger and Alecia Thomas

Many stories have been told of the coming of honeybees to California. In 1925, Mrs. Fremont Older interviewed Mr. John Quincy Adams Ballou - then 99 years old – for his story on how honeybees came to our valley.

Mr. Ballou related that in 1852, Commodore Stockton sent a great shipment of plants, shrubs and trees to San Jose from a ranch that Stockton had bought from James A. Forbes. The large shipment was in the charge of a botanist named Christopher Shelton. Among Shelton's personal belongings were two swarms of bees accompanying the trees and shrubs - the first bees that ever came to the Pacific coast*. The honeybees attracted little attention until April 1856, when the nursery stock imported by Stockton was sold at auction by James F. Kennedy, superintendent of the Stockton ranch.

**A plaque commemorating these first bees in California can be found at the San Jose Mineta International Airport, which is located where Stockton ranch used to be.*

Tragically Mr. Shelton was killed in the explosion of the steamship 'Jenny Lind' on April 11, 1853, as it was travelling to San Francisco from Alviso.

The late Mr. Shelton's two swarms of bees produced much amazement at the auction when they sold for \$100 - a huge sum in those days. The quick sale for such a large amount of money stirred the speculative instincts of one William Buck. Mr. Buck had very little money, but he collected all he could and started immediately for New York, where he bought 40 or 50 swarms of bees which made the trip safely on the deck of a steamer. Upon arriving back home, Mr. Buck sold half his bees to the Santa Clara County treasurer, Mr. Frederick G. Appleton. He was delighted to find that bees had more swarms in California than in the east - in this warm climate as many as 3 swarms came in one season. Buck took care of Appleton's bees as Appleton knew nothing of beekeeping and was afraid of them. Neither man sold any bees to others because they now had a monopoly on local bees and did not want to force down the price. However, a Mr. Freeman Gates, a resident of San Jose, also imported some bees. Later in the 1860's the captains of passenger steamers brought swarms of bees to ports in this area on their steamer decks and sold them at auction on the wharves of San Francisco for \$50 a swarm.

In 1857, Mr. Buck asked Mr. Ballou if he could keep his 40 swarms of bees on Mr. Ballou's ranch on Milpitas Rd. where he had established a nursery. To help feed the bees, Ballou

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sowed 4 acres of buckwheat. However, he was not much interested in being a beekeeper and besides he dreaded their stings.

Mr. Buck - a man of great enthusiasm - talked Ballou into going with him to Oregon to introduce bees there. Ballou was interested in the Oregon apple orchards, as he already sold Oregon apples in San Francisco for 25 cents each. So, putting 10 swarms of bees on a steamer bound for Oregon, off they went.

When the men arrived in Salem, the Oregonians were in the throes of their constitutional convention. Mr. Buck tried to stir up enthusiasm for the bees, but those who were interested had little money to pay \$100 a swarm. Mr. Ballou spent time inspecting the apple orchards. Lack of bee sales sent Buck back to California, while Ballou stayed behind and took 4 swarms of bees from Portland to the commandant at Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River, which later became the state of Washington. The commandant did not care for the bees. Ballou left them with a Mr. Knight on the chance Knight might sell them and Ballou returned to San Jose. In the meantime, Ballou's brother had purchased 5 swarms from Buck, but was disgusted with the deal and Ballou purchased them.

Ballou then began learning all he could about bees. He studied the Langstroth system. All that Langstroth and others knew about bees was learned from a man named Huber - the great blind naturalist. In order to protect himself from bee stings, Ballou began to smoke cigars when working with the hives - "smoking" a hive to gain access is a common method in honey harvesting - though cigars are no longer used. He was so successful with the bees that in 1 year his 5 swarms grew to 22, and the second year they multiplied to 109.

The fame of the San Jose honeybees began to spread. Around 1959, a Mr. Graves and Mr. Charles Reed of Sacramento came to San Jose with the object of buying bees for the orchards in Yolo County. From Mr. Ballou, the two men made the largest purchase known in San Jose - 60 swarms at \$85 a swarm.

This sale, along with other transactions in bees, made Mr. Ballou a profit of \$600. However, Ballou's success was not to continue. Honeybees liked the California climate and flowers so much that they multiplied very rapidly. Soon after, the bee business was overdone and bees could scarcely be given away.