

HARBISON WAS THE KING OF THE CALIFORNIA BEEKEEPERS

John Stewart Harbison was born the third child of William and Margaret (Curry) Harbison, on a farm near Freedom, Beaver County, Pennsylvania, on September 29, 1826.

Most of his early life was spent farming in Pennsylvania and, following his father, he became a beekeeper. In 1854, having an attack of gold fever, he left home and headed for California. He soon realized that mining was lots of work for very little reward and decided to pursue something with which he was familiar. He sent home for an assortment of seeds and fruit trees. When the shipment arrived, he started the first nursery of fruit and shade trees in the Sacramento Valley. From these trees started the great orchards which line the banks of the Sacramento River.

In May, 1857, he returned to his eastern home and began preparations for shipping a quantity of bees to California and, after a journey of about four weeks, landed sixty-seven colonies of bees safely on the west coast. Thus began the history of beekeeping in California.

After spending some years in other California locations, on November 28, 1869, he arrived in San Diego aboard the ship "Orizaba" with one hundred and ten colonies of bees. In the spring of 1874, he moved with his wife and daughter to a homestead near the Sweetwater River, twenty-three miles east of San Diego in a little valley now known as Harbison Canyon. Within seven years time, he was the largest producer of honey in the world, operating 2,000 to 3,000 hives. At that time, having several hundred hives was considered a large operation.

In 1873, when California produced so much honey that the Pacific coast markets couldn't absorb it all, he loaded 21,000 pounds of comb honey and sent it to Chicago by steamship and train. His innovative section honey boxes became the industry standard. And after the great bee fever boom of the 1860's had quieted down, when most stocked beehives sold for four dollars, Harbison Hives still commanded \$100.

His success in capitalizing on the vast honey potential of San Diego County, along with his extensive campaign of selling bees to the residents of the county, was the major force in making San Diego County the greatest honey producing county in California by 1874, which in turn made California the leading honey producing state in the Union. John Harbison was a major contributor to the theory of bee culture with his development of new tools and methods that characterized the remarkable advances made in nineteenth century apicultural science. Both his brother William and John were important early authors on bee keeping science.

John Harbison opened up the great retail markets east of the Mississippi River needed to absorb the tremendous honey crops produced in California. He was worthy of the title bestowed upon him by members of the bee industry--"King of the Beekeepers."

At this year's Alpine History Day Celebration, the history of beekeeping in Alpine will be the subject of the special exhibit. In addition to information about Mr. Harbison and other beekeepers, there will be a display showing the life cycle of the bee, beekeeping artifacts, an observation hive and a replica of the famous Harbison Hive. This promises to be a very interesting and informative exhibit and is very relevant because of recent news reports about the mysterious decimation of bee populations throughout the world. The celebration will be held on Saturday, June 2, 2007, from 11:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. A lunch of chili, salad, bread, a drink and an ice cream sundae will be served for only \$7.00 for adults and \$3.00 for children. The winning third grade essays will be featured and while children enjoy the fun jump adults will enjoy the old time music and the silent auction. Everyone is invited to this event—come celebrate with us!

Carol Walker and her husband Paul have lived in Alpine since 1988. Carol is the Membership Chairman of the Alpine Historical Society. She can be reached at cwalker@alpinehistory.org or 445-4024.