

Growing Together: Cook's Bee Supplies



By Brock Weir

The Auroran's series on Aurora's oldest businesses continues with an out-of-the-way corner of Edward Street.

The business hasn't changed much over the past 92 years, after all the bees still do most of the work.

But, as Aurora has evolved from a rural to urban community, Cook's Bee Supplies is a stalwart survivor of the days of yore.

Situated on Edward Street near Harrison Avenue, the business was founded by Hudson Cook before continuing down the generations to his grandson Jim Cook, who sold it to the current owners. Living across the street from the business for decades, Mr. Cook still keeps a welcome, watchful eye on the operations.

Cook's Bee Supplies was founded by chance. A blacksmith by trade, Hudson took over the bee supply business to settle a debt.

"He went north and cut wood, sold the owners of the bee business a pile of lumber and they hadn't paid him," Jim recalls. "They were having an auction sale and he came over to Aurora and bought the business. It was a partnership to start out with and my dad came here in 1922 to take over. He ran it a year with a partner and said to grandpa he was either going to run it himself or someone else had to do it."

From there, a family tradition was born.

Jim's father, James Hudson Cook, came to like the business. He had grown up with a few hives of his own, so supplying home and large scale bee keepers with the tools of the trade was right up his alley.

The business as it is known today, started a little bit further south in Aurora in a wooden building which burnt down in the 1930s. The current location was built in 1935.

Jim and his wife, Lois, took over the business two decades later near the end of 1959.

"I was going to go out west with the bees, but Dad wanted me to take this over," says Mr. Cook of his aspirations to set out to start a business for himself in the prairies. "It was a case of making a living and this was just one way of doing it. A bee keeper was going to back me and get me established in the province. He had taken over a new school and he was going to have me work in his extracting room. The plans were all made and then Dad wanted me to take over."

For Mr. Cook, there was never a question of how to take over the business and put his own stamp on it; the priorities were to tackle each day, week, month, and year, improving the business as one went and making sure it stayed alive.

?Each season had its ups and downs,? he says. ?You were busy if you had a good honey crop and if you didn't have a good honey crop, you had to figure out how you were going to stay alive the next year. It had its ups and downs and you could get by if you worked at it.

?I had years where I would produce 30 ? 40 tons of honey,? he adds of yards of hives he had across Ontario. ?It all depended on the weather. If you were getting sun and moisture, you would have to go almost weekly to make sure they had room and they weren't swarming. It's a trade that you had to learn.?

He eventually decided to sell his business when, after trying their hands at the bee supply game, Mr. Cook's own son and daughter decided their interests lay elsewhere. The sale coincided with a changing market, addressing challenges that weren't even on the horizon when Jim took it over ? including changing geography and markets.

?There are less opportunities to run bees in this area,? he says. ?There aren't the crops today like the clover crops and there isn't the foliage for the bees to work on like there was years ago. You have to have equipment for the bees to work, and the veil and smoker and equipment to operate them. Then you have to have a truck to haul the honey in. You wouldn't notice the labour with one backyard hive, but to make it where you're making some money off things it is a pretty fair investment.

?It will always be a trade, there will always be a demand, and I think there will always be the backyard beekeeper that produces enough for his family and friends.?