

Back in the day

Wild about honey.

Story and photos by Staber W. Reese

Followers of this column will recognize the name Staber W. Reese. Staber was a photographer for the Wisconsin Conservation Department in the 1940s through 60s, and was a nature writer as well. The following is excerpted from his article "Wild Honey" which appeared in the December 1943 issue of our predecessor publication, Wisconsin Conservation Bulletin.

A plentiful supply of many foods is available if one takes advantage of the wild fruits, berries and nuts found in every section of Wisconsin. Especially in these days of food rationing, people are becoming more conscious of the existence of these natural foods and though transportation offers difficult problems, this year found more and more people in our wooded areas gathering nuts and berries and other wild foods.

This summer I was introduced to the sport of hunting bee-trees. This used to be a very popular sport. Early pioneers obtained their honey in much the same manner I am about to describe.

One Sunday late this summer, Sam Ruegger and John Helsing, Jr., forest ranger and conservation warden, respectively, at Winter, invited me to accompany them in search of a bee-tree. Sam and Johnny gathered their equipment which consisted of two small boxes of honey, a bottle of oil of anise, two small pieces of flannel cloth, two large water pails, a smoker, axe, a two-man crosscut saw, protractor, graph paper and a compass.

We drove south of Winter a few miles and turned down an old road. Near the road in a fairly open spot Sam placed one of the small boxes of honey on an old stump. A twig stuck vertically in the side of the box carried one of the small pieces of flannel saturated with oil of anise. Carefully, Sam paced off 200 yards from this first bait and placed the second box of honey and flannel cloth in the same manner.

Returning to the first bait we found about a dozen bees already gathered, partaking of the honey and then circling higher and higher. Then Sam said, "Now watch them go in a straight line, they are headed for their bee hive which is some hollow tree, and on the return trip will bring back more bees."

Sam noted the direction with his com-



This delicious wild honey comes from the nectar of wild grape, goldenrod, basswood and wild raspberry.

pass and then proceeded to the next bait...and there were about the same number of bees on this bait. Here again each bee, laden with honey, rose in a circle and then took a straight course for its hive. Noting the direction of these bees with his compass, Sam plotted the bee flight lines on graph paper...and drew a line connecting the two baits. Knowing the direction the bees took from each bait, Sam extended flight lines with the aid of a protractor and where the lines crossed would be the bee-tree.

After pacing off the estimated distance, Sam stopped short and said, "It's either that big elm or the yellow birch." Standing under the birch we could see some bees buzzing around near the top of the hole. Sam had taken us to within 50 feet of the tree.

The tree was notched with the aid of the crosscut saw and the axe, then felled in precisely the direction desired.

Johnny soon had the smoker going — a small can containing burning rags and leaves from which smoke is forced with the aid of a bellows. Johnny used

Before filling their pails, the bee-tree hunters enjoy a taste of wild honey straight from the tree.



Smoking the bees keeps them docile while removing the honey from the downed tree.

the crosscut and sawed about one-third through the tree at intervals a foot apart over that portion of the tree containing the bees. Evidently, the smoke took most of the fight out of the bees as they didn't seem to bother either of them. With the aid of an axe the wood blocks were removed exposing the honeycombs and Sam was already reaching in peeling off layers of comb laden with golden wild honey. Johnny was kept busy smoking the bees while Sam removed chunk after chunk of wild honey and soon filled his two pails.

I had never tasted honey quite like it before — it was delicious. Sam and Johnny tell me that the nectar gathered by the bees for this honey comes mostly from basswood, wild raspberry, wild grape and goldenrod. It is quite debatable as to which flowers and blossoms produce the best honey. I'll leave it up to the bees to make it good. 

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