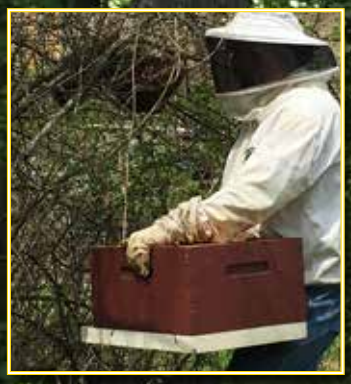
Sweet as Honey



Local couple starts apiary after surprise honeybee discovery.

BY JENNIFER BROZAK

Linda and Norman Lachimia.

As union carpenters, Linda and Norman Lachimia were always intrigued by the historic 1837 one-room schoolhouse that stood abandoned on the property next to their Sewickley Township home. So when the opportunity to purchase the crimson building presented itself in 2009, the husband-and-wife team jumped at the chance.

Restoration began almost immediately, and continued for several years. One day, while they were working, the couple heard a loud buzzing. Upon further inspection, they discovered that a colony of honeybees had been using the walls of the schoolhouse as a hive. From the size of the colony, they knew that the bees had been in the wall for quite a long time.

Recognizing the plight of the honeybee, the Lachimias didn't want to harm the insects. They worked around the colony for nearly a year before calling upon a local beekeeper for advice. Together with the beekeeper, they worked carefully to find the queen and remove the hive from the 175-year-old schoolhouse, preserving as much of the colony as possible.

"We couldn't believe how big the hive was," says Linda Lachimia. "Our beekeeper friend helped us collect the bees and place them in a brood box."

The discovery of the bees stirred memories of her Czechoslovakian great-grandfather, who had been an accomplished beekeeper. Combined with her love of farming, Lachimia's beekeeping lineage made the decision to keep the bees an easy one. Crimson Creek Apiaries was born.

"I come from a long line of beekeepers, but there were still a lot of things I had forgotten," Lachimia notes. "I needed a bit of a refresher before we could learn to take care of the bees on our own."

Despite their early trepidation, the Lachimias were excited about the prospect of raising bees. Using his carpentry skills, Norman Lachimia—who is now known locally as "Swarmin' Norman"—began crafting Langstroth hives for their "schoolgirls," as they fondly refer to their bee colony. Patented in 1852, Langstroth hives feature an open top with movable frames that allow beekeepers to remove honey.

"Langstroth hives give the bees just enough space to move about the frame," explains Linda. "The frames fit easily in the extractor, and there's very little wood waste when building the hive."

Crimson Creek currently has about 40 to 50 active hives, and it takes about five seasons before a hive will produce enough honey to harvest. In the warmer months, the colonies peak to about 60,000 to 80,000 bees per hive; this number drops to about 35,000 to 40,000 bees per hive during the winter. Hives are spread throughout the Lachimias' properties in both North Huntingdon and Sewickley Township.

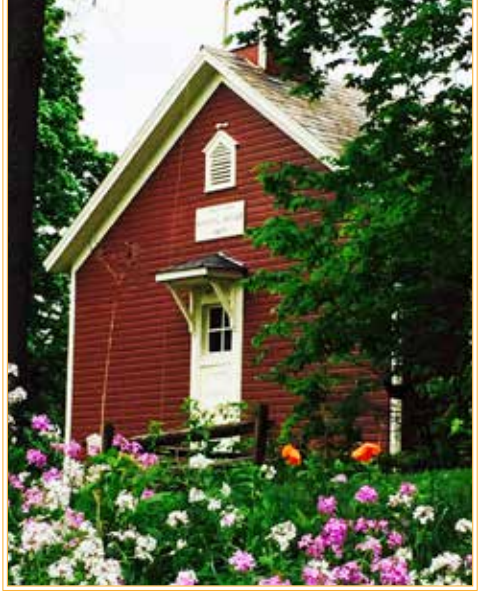
Of course, if you raise honeybees, you get honey—a lot of honey.

"We had a heck of a surplus," recalls Linda with a laugh. "We were giving it to family and friends as Christmas gifts, and even they couldn't use it fast enough."

To offset the cost of packaging and preparing the honey, the Lachimias decided to start selling their products. Honey production is now the couple's full-time job.

The honey is made one batch at a time and is sold raw and strained; it is not filtered or pasteurized. Best sellers are the wildflower honey, as well as alfalfa, goldenrod, clover and blueberry blossom honey. The Lachimias sell their honey at a variety of local shops and festivals throughout Allegheny and Westmoreland counties. They also sell a variety of honey products, including honey candy, honey sticks and whipped honey. If it's a particularly good year, they'll sell the honeycomb and wax itself, both of which are 100-percent edible.

While business is going strong, the couple has genuine fears about the collapse of the bee population, which has significantly dwindled in recent years, putting the global food supply at risk. According to the National Resource Defense Council, many crops, including apples, berries, cantaloupes, cucumbers, alfalfa and almonds, could be decimated if the bee population continues to decline.



The discovery of the bees stirred Linda's memories of her Czechoslovakian great-grandfather, who had been an accomplished beekeeper.

"Modern society is wiping honeybees out. With lawn-spraying services, we're destroying all of the dandelions, and we need dandelions. They're so important—they can make or break a beehive. We're destroying the natural cycle that we need in order for honeybees to thrive," explains Linda.

This is why Crimson Creek also offers honeybee swarm removal and extraction. Should a person find a swarm of honeybees in an unwanted location, Norman will capture the swarm and move it to a safe location.

Educating the community at large is important to the couple. The restored schoolhouse, which is known historically as Schoolhouse #3 at Millvale/Dick Station, is now used for educational purposes and presentations to various community groups.

The Lachimias hope that their experience with bees will inspire others to become backyard beekeepers, and want to alleviate the fears people may have about bees in general. Yes, they get stung sometimes—mostly when they're extracting honey from the hive—but unlike hornets, wasps or ground bees, honeybees will die after they sting you, because they cannot pull their barbed stingers back out of skin.

"Yes, they're wild insects, and we can't control them, but we shouldn't fear them," says Linda. "Honeybees don't want to sting you. They're overachievers—they just want to work on their blossom and return to the hive."

For more information on Crimson Creek Apiaries, visit crimsoncreekapiaries.com. ■