

## Getting the Scoop on the Chicago Honey Coop

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The Chicago Honey Coop is likely one of the largest and most successful urban beekeeping operations in North America. It operates 80 colonies from one apiary in the economically depressed neighbourhood of North Lawndale. The Coop currently has 37 members. I (AM) caught up with one of the Coop's founders, Michael Thompson (MT), during a visit to Chicago in November. Michael has been keeping bees for over 40 years and is a prominent figure in the very vibrant urban agriculture movement in Chicago. The Coop is one of a number of success stories within that movement; it exists as an independent business that operates without grants, while at the same tackling pressing urban social issues such as food security, unemployment and agricultural education.

### Part 1. The Coop and its Operations

**AM:** How did the Chicago Honey Coop come into existence?

**COOP:** In the winter of 2003 three beekeepers got together and decided to kick around the idea of a co-operative. It started the summer before at a farmers market when I met a beekeeper (Tim Brown) selling his honey. The next day I called Stephanie Arnett, a third beekeeper, and said: "you, Tim and I might want to meet together this winter". So we did and we decided that we had some shared goals. There were three goals in fact. Firstly it was to create a business that could support itself. Number two was to produce a delicious healthy product that you could hold in your hand. Finally, we wanted to do job training. It was surprising to me that we could arrive at shared goals and then realise them in less than a year. We were able to produce product, go to market, do job training and make some money all in the first year. I think that has to do with the livestock that we deal with, I mean honey bees are so fast; once they get going there is no stopping them.

**AM:** There have not been new honey-producing cooperatives in North America for over sixty years. Why did you decide on a cooperative structure?

**COOP:** Tim Brown, one of the three founders, was the first to say the words "Chicago Honey Coop". I liked the sound of it. So we investigated what an agricultural cooperative would mean in Illinois. When I read the rules, which were written in the 1930s, they were incredibly accessible. I understood the language immediately. The document was not long, it was clear and it seemed to fit what we were doing. I admit I was a bit naïve

about some of it. The whole 50/50 split for a beehive, for example, was not sensible and, in retrospect, we also did not have any rules for the members. So we have had to revisit the original model, but I think that's healthy. After five years we are still living, we're still producing honey and it is delicious.

**AM:** How has the structure operated in terms of financing your venture and getting broad participation in the organisation?

**COOP:** It has been both good and bad. Many people are attracted to the idea of a cooperative and for that reason we grew very fast. That was very helpful for the first two years. Some of those members we never see. That's not good. The word cooperative is kind of a general term that can mean many things, so I think people are curious about it, which is a good thing. Recently people are especially interested in it because they see it as fairer approach, and it is. I mean, people say to me "are you the owner", well no, I am not the owner. The members own it and I don't mind saying that.

**AM:** Where does the Coop sell its goods? What products does it sell?

**COOP:** The Coop sells honey from its own hives at three farmers markets a week during the summer. Two of them are in the City of Chicago and one is in a Western suburb (Oak Park). We sell honey, sometimes pollen, several different kinds of beeswax candles and three body products that were developed by one of the beekeepers (Arnett); a moisturiser, a bath scrub and a lip balm.

**AM:** How many people does the Coop employ?



**COOP:** We decided to have a job-training program when we first started. In our first year we had twenty trainees and it was really way too much. The second year we had ten and now it is much more closer to two or three a year because that is how it works best.

We employ two beekeepers full-time and we each get paid \$10 per hour. In the summer we hire two

other beekeepers. We do everything together: we all go to market, we do all the beekeeping and we help with production.

**AM:** I understand that the Coop apiary site has more than just bees. There are community gardens. There are events. Could you tell me about these?

**COOP:** One of the things we decided about the site where we are, which is a 95% African-American neighbourhood, is that we would be as open to the neighbours as

possible. We would not only engage them, but we would also invite them to come. We were very lucky because there is both a big parking lot for the bees, but also a huge area of land that has reverted back to prairie. So we decided that we would test, prepare, and build the soil so we could grow food and people just showed up. It's now five years later and many neighbours and friends grow their own food there. In fact it has expanded now and we are going to double the size of the growing area.

As for events, they are never exactly planned. The greatest thing recently was that Slow Food Chicago approached us two years ago and they wanted to have an event there that would benefit the Coop. They decided that they wanted to have it on the Summer Solstice. Now it has become an annual food event. It has turned out to be a perfect mix of people; neighbours came, people came from all over the city and suburbs.

We have also had what some people call agri-tourism. People constantly want to have tours of the site.

## **Part 2. Keeping Bees in the City**

**Adony Melathopoulos (AM):** Why keep bees in the city? How many colonies do you think Chicago could support?

**Michael Thompson (COOP):** For me keeping bees in the city is a logistic issue: I live in the city so why not keep bees here? I don't want to travel miles and miles to get to them. I'd rather just take the subway. Plus the other reason for it is that in the city you don't have the agricultural pollution that might exist in rural areas. We have had several city honeys tested for heavy metals and they are fine.

The number of colonies that could be supported in the city seems unlimited. There is probably a limit, but I have never imagined it. One of the other reasons we keep bees in the city is the quantity and diversity of flora. It's just massive. The amount of nectar forage is unbelievable. Just one example is the linden trees. There are probably millions of those trees in Chicago planted as shade trees. They make delicious honey.

**AM:** If there are so many advantages to keeping bees in the city why then are there so few colonies in the city? Why are there 3 million colonies in rural areas and maybe fewer than 1000 colonies in North American cities?

**COOP:** Most people don't understand that you can grow food in the city. That is why people don't do it. They don't understand that the city is as natural a space as a rural area. In fact in some ways its better here in that there is more nectar forage. When I moved to Chicago I didn't understand that and I have been beekeeping since I was a child. And here I was in my early twenties thinking, "oh, maybe it won't work". Well of course it worked very well, because of the density of trees and shrubs. Every clover that can be grown in the upper Midwest grows here in the city. It's a cultural leap that people have not been able to make although even this is changing. There is now an urban farming movement right here in this city and it exists in many other cities.

**AM:** What are the challenges to securing tenure on apiary sites in the city?

**COOP:** I am not sure I think tenure is necessary, unless you mean temporary tenure, because a city the size of Chicago offers so many sites. There are probably millions of rooftops, empty parking lots that nobody uses any more and railway right-of-ways. The challenges to securing these are specific to each site. The biggest challenge is the fear-factor from neighbours.

**AM:** What about municipalities? What role can they play to helping or hindering you to getting apiary sites?

**COOP:** Again, it is specific to the city or village. In Chicago we are lucky we don't have any problems with this, there are no rules against having bee hives in the city, although there are rules around being a public nuisance. So if a neighbour of yours decides to report you to the Department of Buildings then you can be cited and fined. Then you might need to move the colonies or somehow figure out what the problem is and try to solve it. I only confronted this issue once in my long urban beekeeping career and that was many years ago.

**AM:** I understand that there are honey bee colonies on the roof of Chicago City Hall in the downtown loop. How do colonies fair in the middle of a very urban setting?

**COOP:** We have a theory now that beehives do better on rooftops. Some beekeepers believe that it has to do with the fact that it's drier and better ventilated, and this makes sense because the rooftop hives are doing very well. It is amazing to have hives right downtown in the city where millions of people come everyday. Nobody gets hurt. The honey is delicious, maybe not quite as good as the honey on the Westside of Chicago, but still very good. The rooftop colonies actually make more honey and may have better winter survival than colonies on the ground.

**AM:** How about the challenges of operating in an urban space? It must rarely be ideal.

**COOP:** We have been very lucky to have kind help from friends. The first season we extracted honey in somebody's kitchen on the third floor of an apartment building. So we had to take that honey upstairs; four thousand pounds up the stairs and then back down again. That was not ideal. But luckily a very kind Coop member, Sydney Barton, offered us a space in a furniture warehouse. There is a loading dock there where we can back up the truck. There is a freight elevator. I mean those logistics are a problem and are big things to solve. Right now it seems perfect, I have to say, but I also know its not always going to be like this. One day we won't be in that warehouse, someday we won't have that apiary site, so it's a constant reshaping of how the business works.

### **Part 3. Thinking Ahead / Forward Thinking**

**AM:** You were recently invited to attend the Slow Food conference Terra Madre in Torino, Italy. How do you see the Coop's work in the fast-paced city being inline with those of Slow Food?

**COOP:** The thing about Terra Madre is that it is not about geography. It is about how one cares for the land where you are producing food. So it's not about whether it is in a city or a rural setting. For me it's the same. I saw no difference between what they are doing and what we are doing. Terra Madre is a meeting of producers from all over the world and the people who support those producers; cooks, educators, musicians, dancers, people who are part of this movement of people who care about the earth and who care about production and local exchange. What we do is the very same thing, but we just happen to do it in a big city. We are not the only ones doing it in a city. It has always happened, we will always grow food in cities, but its not talked about that much. I was very happy to be in Torino because there was a real possibility of learning so much from the people who had come from all over the world to celebrate this honouring of the earth: Terra Madre.

**AM:** How do you think about rural beekeeping? How would you like rural beekeepers to think about what the Co-op is doing in the city?

**COOP:** I was a bee inspector for the State of Illinois for both Cook and Lake Counties. I travelled around a lot then and still think about rural beekeeping. The great thing about our current time is that we can communicate easily with one another. It is important to be supportive of each other.

The urban and the rural have so much to learn from one another. The resources that exist among beekeepers are vast and we like to share our knowledge. So when I think about rural beekeeping, I think about that, I think about what we can share; markets, equipment, transportation. I don't know that the relationship is symmetrical, but I know that when I am around rural beekeepers I can't ask them enough questions about their work, and they ask me about my work too.

A good example was a beekeeping panel recently held at Garfield Park Conservatory in Chicago. Seventy some people showed up to learn about the challenges facing modern beekeeping, and the panel was split evenly across the board, with two rural beekeepers and two urban. That was a very exciting conversation and I didn't even sense the division, but I knew it. It was a natural thing and that is the beauty of what is going on right now. People are exchanging information and their knowledge, things that matter to them. Right now is a very special time for us beekeepers.

**AM:** Where does the Coop see itself in five years from now?

**COOP:** We're always trying to think ahead. We want to be able to raise our own bees, produce Illinois queens and maybe sell nucleus hives. It has also been suggested that we become a distributor of beekeeping equipment. I don't know where the coop will be in five years, but wherever it is, we will continue to learn and maintain a flexible plan.