

## *The Bee Hunters in Iowa - 1835*

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### **Early beekeeping as recorded by the honorable A. R. Fulton 1882**

Earliest record available indicates the honey bees had found their way west as far as the Missouri River in 1797. No exact location was given for this record.

The timber lands bordering on Skunk River of Iowa were especially noted as the paradise of the bee-hunters, before any permanent settlement of the country. Parties of bee-hunters often penetrated that region in quest of honey. This will serve to show something as to the nature of Iowa's primitive history.

**October 1835**, one John Huff, who subsequently settled in Jefferson county, accompanied by a lad named Levi Johnson, went to the west side of Skunk River and encamped, a short distance above where the village of Rome, in Henry County, is now situated. At this point in time, there was a trading house kept by one William McPherson, as the Sac and Fox Indians still occupied that region. The purpose of Mr. Huff and his young companion was to spend a month in bee-hunting. They continued to ramble through the heavy timber, skirting the river and its tributaries, until the middle of November, when they began preparations for returning to the Mississippi. Huff had collected 80 gallons of honey, and Johnson about 40, which was put into barrels manufactured by themselves at camp. The river now beginning to rise a little, they prepared a couple of canoes or dugouts. Into these they loaded their freight, consisting of three barrels of honey, guns, axes, auger, with some other tools and camping utensils, also a small stack of provisions, including five dressed wild turkeys and some venison.

Passengers and freight being aboard they set out on their voyage for Illinois, with the two canoes lashed together, they glided along smoothly until about sundown, when they ran upon a "sawyer" (log or tree caught in river) which capsized the canoes. All of the freight and two of the barrels of honey went to the bottom in 12 feet of water. The canoes were drawn ashore, and the remaining barrel of honey rolled out. In his effort to save the property, Mr. Huff even lost his shoes. Leaving canoes and honey, Mr. Huff set out for Burlington barefoot, where he obtained another pair of shoes, and grappling hooks to use in searching for the sunken freight. Young Johnson returned to his mothers', in the eastern part of Henry county. After an absence of about 12 days, they returned to the scene of their disaster to seek for the lost treasure. By means of the iron hooks the two barrels of honey were soon recovered; but the other articles were not so easily found. An Indian who was present agreed, for one dollar, to dive and get the gun. He went down once, but did not succeed. While he was warming himself for a second trial, Mr. Huff himself drew up the gun with the iron hook. The two axes, drawing-knife and auger were found the next January by cutting a hole in the ice. Without further disaster, Huff and Johnson succeeded in getting their cargo of honey to Cartage, Illinois, where they sold it for **fifty cents a gallon. ( or .05 cents a lb!)**

During the same season another party collected honey on the east side of the Skunk River and along Big Creek, in Henry County, some 14 barrels of honey, which they sold in Burlington.

In the autumn on 1836, Hr. Huff found ten 'bee-trees' on a small branch near where Fairfield was subsequently located. He sent the product of this 'find' to Cartage by one James Lanman, who sold it for \$22.75. During the same year a man named Ballard settled or encamped on this same small stream, and for a time followed the business of bee-hunting. The stream was afterward known as 'Ballard's Branch.' Ballard's camp was about two miles northeast of Fairfield, and his 'claim' embraced the fine grove of timber in that vicinity. But when the country quickly began to settle up he found his occupation gone, became discouraged and went west.