

Chapter One

Dad kept bees. He doesn't have them any more, and I'll tell you why. First, though, I'll explain how he got interested in them.

Uncle Fred came to stay with us for his holidays about five years ago. I was about seven or eight years old at the time. We depended so much on Uncle Fred, who seemed to know everything. He'd worked on a farm, he told us, and he knew all sorts of things.

We were outside having a barbecue to welcome him to our house. We heard a faint hum somewhere in the distance. As we cooked our lunch, and as the sausages sizzled, the hum got louder and louder. Finally, the sun dimmed as a swarm of bees cast its shadow over us. We—that is, Mum, Dad and I—dived through the back door, to hide from thousands of bees. All except Uncle Fred, that is, who had obviously seen this sort of thing happen

before. He remained outside and watched the swarm settle in our garden.

Gradually, after the first few bees had settled, the rest – I reckon there'd have been many thousands of them – soon followed the first bees onto the bush. The air was quiet, but there, under a bush, was a large ball, bigger than any football I can remember playing with. It was just bees – thousands of them, all in one huge ball.

We went outside again, especially after Uncle Fred told us that it was safe to do so. He had told us before that it was safe to go out, when the bees were in the air, but we didn't take that advice from him.

'Keep them,' Uncle Fred told Dad. 'They'll be good honey. Good for the garden, too.' I guess he meant the help to pollinate Dad's tiny vegetable plot, and his trees. As the fruit trees were out in blossom, Dad was keen for the bees to stay there.

'Got a box?' Uncle Fred asked. He meant a proper beehive box, but we didn't have one. Mum gave him a cardboard box she got from the laundry cupboard. Uncle Fred pushed in the sides of the box lightly to see how strong

the cardboard was. He seemed to be happy that it would work. He cut out a slit at the bottom for an entrance – it was only narrow, about as wide as one of my fingers, but going right across the box, from one side to the next.

Then he asked Mum for her secateurs. He took them, and the box, to where the bees were. Snap. Off came the branch they were resting on. He put it, with the ball of bees, inside the box. Sticky tape kept the lid on while he carried the box gently to some bushes near the back fence. We all admired the way Uncle Fred handled everything that day.

We went back to our barbecue. The chops were black, the onions burnt, and the chips were stuck in a horrible mess to the steel plate. But we didn't mind, after the excitement of collecting bees.

For the next few weeks, we'd each go and look at the bees coming out of the box while others returned through the narrow slit that Uncle Fred had cut.

And Dad was pleased with his fruit trees. That was the first year since he had planted them that we got more than one peach each. That year, we got two peaches, an apricot, and a plum each.

It was several months before we saw Uncle Fred again. It was during the Christmas holidays, when it was really hot, our lawns were dry.

‘How’s the honey?’ he asked.

We told him that we hadn’t touched the box of bees since he was there last.

‘We must get the honey out,’ he told us. ‘Got a smoker?’

Beekeepers use small metal smokers which they fill with smouldering leaves or grass. They puff the smoke through entrance of the hives before they open them. This calms bees down and makes them easier to handle, and stops many of them from stinging the person opening the hives. It’s the smell of smoke that helps bees to survive bush fires. They smell smoke, and say to one another, ‘Where there’s smoke, there’s fire. Let’s drink up and be merry, for tomorrow ... Well, who knows?’ So the bees, on smelling the smoke, open up the capped cells of honey, and fill their stomachs. This gives them several days reserve of food if they have to leave their hives. That’s enough food to see them through until they can locate a new source of nectar, away from the bush fire. The bees, with their stomachs full

of honey, are very quiet and easy to handle. They're too happy to go around stinging people, then.

But we didn't have a smoker, we told Uncle Fred. At the time, Dad didn't have any of the proper beekeeping equipment.

'We must light a fire,' Uncle Fred said, 'just like we used to, on the farm.'

Uncle Fred thought for a moment. 'Got a veil?' he asked. We all shook our heads. I don't think any of us knew what a veil was for.

'We must have something,' Uncle Fred told us. 'Just in case we disturb an angry bee.' He turned to Mum. 'Got any old stockings?'

Mum went inside and came out with several old stockings, mostly with holes either in their heels, or at the toes.

'We'll put these over our heads ... just in case,' Uncle Fred warned us. We followed his example, and pulled an old stocking over our heads. We looked freakish, wearing those masks over our faces. We tied them loosely around our necks ... in case an angry bee wanted to climb inside

them. 'They often do,' Uncle Fred warned us. Dad pulled his stocking tighter around his neck.

Uncle Fred took out several newspapers from our house and lit them in front of the cardboard box. He squatted and puffed to get the fire started. The paper smoked and smouldered. Suddenly, there were flames. Big flames. The newspaper caught on fire ... just as Uncle Fred had planned. The papers burnt fiercely. Smoke poured everywhere. Just as Uncle Fred had planned.

The cardboard box too was alight. Uncle Fred trampled on the newspapers to put out the flames. He hit the box, too, trying to extinguish that, but he upset the bees inside.

Bees dislike any sudden movements, even after they've smelt smoke and drunk all the honey; they get really angry.

But Uncle Fred couldn't put out the flames from the newspapers, or from the box. The fire got bigger.

Then the dry bush above the bees was ablaze. Dad ran outside and turned on the garden hose to spray water onto the flames. Everything was so dry that the bush burned quickly. He created a lot of smoke, probably more than even the bees could cope with.

The wooden fence caught alight. Dad hosed that, but already it was charred, and the flames big.

Down the road a little way we heard a bell ringing. We didn't take much notice of it ... but it got louder and louder. And louder. And louder. The noise seemed to stop outside our house. But we were too busy really to take any notice of it. Uncle Fred was still stamping out the flames from the newspapers; Dad was hosing the fence, and Mum was calling Spare Parts inside (Spare Parts was made from all the left over parts that didn't go into making proper animals; his ears rightly belonged to a German shepherd, his nose, to a kelpie, his body to a Labrador, legs to a hound of some sort, and the rest of him ... well, who knows? Spare Parts was sent inside the house. He was less of a nuisance there.

There was a voice at the fence. A deep voice. A gruff voice. I knew it meant trouble. I ignored it. Dad looked up. And Uncle Fred looked up. I hid behind the smoke. There were four firemen there, watching us. 'What are you fools doing?' the fire chief asked.

Thinking back to that afternoon, it should have been obvious to the firemen that Uncle Fred was trying to extinguish the newspapers and the cardboard box, between slapping himself and rubbing numerous painful stings; and Dad, hosing the back fence and the bushes. The four firemen watched. So did some of the neighbours, and some of my friends from down the street, who came along to see what a fire engine was doing at our house.

‘It’s idiots like you,’ the chief told Dad and Uncle Fred, ‘that waste our time. While we’re here attending you fools, we could be putting out real fires.’

The firemen didn’t come any closer than the fence. They waited and watched until the flames were out, and Uncle Fred was sitting in a chair, rubbing his sore arms and legs.

‘We must do this properly,’ Uncle Fred told us. Mum and I didn’t want to hear any more about keeping bees, so we went inside the house. But Dad was still interested in them, probably because he hadn’t yet been stung.

Uncle Fred came inside the house again, scratching, to get another cardboard box. He cut an opening in the bottom of it, just like he did before.

We watched him go outside. Dad stood closely by, while Uncle Fred transferred the bees that had survived the bush fire, into the new and clean box.

‘Is there another bush in the garden?’ he whispered to Dad, ‘where we can leave them?’ The one that had hidden the first box of bees was still smouldering near the charred fence.

Uncle Fred recovered from his stings, and soon forgot about them. Dad was pleased to take more advice from him, and together they went into town and bought a lot of equipment. I guess the excitement of trying to get the honey out eventually really got Dad interested in keeping bees. And learning from Uncle Fred to do things properly made everything a little bit more interesting for him.

After a few hours, they returned home with lots of pieces of cut wood, a proper smoker, a piece of metal they called a hive tool, steel straps, a proper veil, a pair of overalls – bee-proof, he had been told – and some clips. The straps and the clips were to keep the lids on the boxes, or several boxes one on top of the others so they didn’t fall apart.

Uncle Fred and Dad made up the boxes and painted them, and made up the frames, and put sheets of beeswax on them. I don't remember exactly how the wax stayed there, but it did. I remember they rolled the wax sheets on to highly strung wire, after weaving it in and out between the strands. Then they pressed the wire into the wax.

There were several boxes, more than we should have had for only one colony of bees.

'That's for when the apiary expands,' Uncle Fred explained. 'They always do. Start with one colony, and that soon becomes two; those two soon become four, and ...' I pictured a whole row of beehives right across the back fence. If Mum hadn't got mad a couple of years later, there would still have been that long row of them along the fence.

Then Uncle Fred showed Dad how to light and to use the smoker, and to transfer the bees from the cardboard box to a proper wooden beehive. That's when we got our first honey from our own bees. It really was delicious!

Uncle Fred told Dad a lot about bees, and then he returned home. But Dad hadn't really learnt much, because a few days after Uncle Fred had left, there was more

trouble. This time it started with a telephone call. One of our neighbours rang to complain that he couldn't leave his house ... and what was Dad going to do about that!

The scene reminded me of that barbecue months before, when the air was full of bees: they were flying everywhere, almost like in a funny cloud of some sort. Our neighbour was at his window, looking out. He saw Dad. And they saw the rest of us, standing at our windows, looking out. Like the first time, months before, the bees settled down, but on a tree in the neighbour's back yard, high up on a branch of an old apple tree.

The neighbour gave permission for Dad and me to go over and collect them from the tree. What else could he do? Dad warned them that they should stay inside ... just in case anything went wrong. 'It sometimes does,' he warned them.

Each spring, bees breed quickly, and soon there are too many for the hive. That's when the colonies divide. The bees build the little cells out of wax to store the honey in, and for the queen bee to lay her eggs in. Some of the little cells are made much larger, three, or even four times as large as the other cells in the frames. These large cells are

the ones that the queen bees are developed in. When the new queens are about to come out of their cells, the old queen leaves the hive, and about half the bees in the hive follow her out. That's what had gone wrong with Dad's hive. They had bred quickly, and were now swarming. And that's how Dad—or rather Uncle Fred—had managed to get the first lot of bees for us.

So Dad wore his overalls, zipped up to his neck, the veil over his face and tucked into the collar of the overalls, his rubber gloves reaching to his elbows, and he carried a long extension ladder on his shoulder. He asked me to carry the smoker, and an empty wooden box. But I didn't mind. I felt safe in my small overalls and my own veil and gloves. The bees wouldn't be able to sting me. And I made sure that my veil was tucked into the neck of my overalls too.

Dad propped the ladder next to the big swarm of bees clustered in the neighbour's tree. The ladder just reached the branch they were on. But the branch was too thick to cut through with secateurs—in fact it was too thick to cut through with anything less than a big saw. There had to be some other way of collecting these bees. Dad looked at the

bees for several minutes, while Mum and our neighbours looked at him. Obviously he was trying to remember what Uncle Fred had told him months before about collecting swarms of bees from trees.

He asked me to pass him the wooden box I was still holding. It had a wooden bottom that was stuck on with sticky tape—a bit like most of his repair jobs around the house.

Anyway, the bottom was attached when I passed the box to him; I held onto the lid, ready to pass that to him when he got his bees into the box.

He held the box under the bees, and tapped the branch. Nothing happened. He banged the branch. Nothing happened. He banged harder. A few bees dropped from the bottom of the cluster to the ground. And so did the box.

He looked worried. I felt worried. Perhaps all those people who were watching us made us uneasy. Perhaps we'd have felt a lot better if we had been alone.

I passed him the box again, but I didn't see the bees clinging to the side of it. And neither did he. But he sure felt them. His long, loud yells almost scared me. Those were

his first stings, but he still had a job to do. He didn't worry about the pain that got worse and worse during the rest of the day.

He held the box under what was left of the cluster, then next time he brushed the remaining few on the tree branch so they fell into the box. Some climbed out again and over the top and along the edge of the box, but most of them stayed in a cluster inside. He passed the box down to me, climbed down the ladder, and put the lid on the box.

I asked him why he had left the box of bees under the apple tree, instead of taking it back to our own garden. His answer made sense to me. The bees from every colony, and particularly the one queen bee in that colony, give off some sort of chemical, a bit like a smell, and all the other bees in that colony are attracted to it. So, any bees, like those that dropped from the branch above, would return to their own colony. He often did that when we collected swarms later on, and it worked every time.

But once the opposite happened. We had collected a swarm from the same neighbour (who by then was not very happy that we had so many beehives in our garden).

Although Dad had just put a swarm in an empty box, the bees kept coming out of the entrance, almost as fast as he could put them inside again. They were behaving like a trail of ants would. The trail of bees got longer, and wider. I was worried that the swarm would fly off again.

Dad solved the problem even before he went to work that morning—he picked up the queen—he found her at the front of the trail. She was surrounded by so many other bees that I don't know how he found out which one was the queen. She's a little bit bigger than the rest of them, but very hard to see amongst the workers. He picked her up with his glove, scooping up a handful of workers—or ordinary bees—and put them back inside the box.

He opened up another hive and shook the bees off a couple of frames. It was then that I saw that both frames were covered, not in honey, but in young brood, bees that hadn't emerged from the cells. He checked that there were no bees attached to those frames, and put them both in with the problem swarm.

'That'll keep them in place,' he told me as he closed up both hives. And he was right. We never had any more

trouble with that swarm. In fact it became one of his strongest colonies, and it gave the most honey.

I suppose Dad had about five hives then, but he became so interested in bees, and in the honey, that he couldn't stop collecting them. He put his name on what he called the swarming list. People would ring him up if a swarm of bees arrived near their houses. This often happened, and he had to go out and buy more boxes and frames. He spent so much of his time making them up that he could hardly keep up with the work involved. But ... he still went on collecting bees!

I remember one morning, just before he left to go to work. Someone in the next suburb called him about a swarm that had settled in their front garden.

Dad, eager to increase the size of his apiary even more, went around there immediately. That was the day that I was late for school. But it was worth it!

The swarm was in a tree, just outside a bus stop on a main road. It was the busy time for the buses, too; there were at least twelve people waiting, with more arriving all

the time. The bus might have been late that morning, but we entertained the people.

The first act in the program was when the zipper on Dad's overalls broke. Mum had warned him to be careful in zipping them up, but he preferred to tug heavily on the little tag. The zipper came off its runner and the overalls opened out again. Dad, not wanting to look silly, went to work with the bees anyway.

Act two was the hole he hadn't seen in his veil.

He propped the ladder that the lady had shown him, against the tree right outside the bus shelter and climbed up. Well, the bees fell down onto Dad's front. His overalls turned from white to black before he fell off the ladder with bees still clinging to him. And that's when his overalls sprang open, showing the bees an easy way to his face through the veil.

And that's when the bus arrived, the show over for the passengers. Wouldn't they have preferred to be late for work and stayed and watched the tricks? Perhaps not, because by then the air was full of angry bees, and on the ground was an angry, swearing man. I could hear the bees

on the outside of my veil, buzzing angrily, trying their hardest to get inside. I didn't want to go to school for the next few days, with my face swollen up the way Dad's was. Most of the people he worked with wouldn't have recognised him when he went into his office and sat down at his desk. He looked so different, with his puffy cheeks, and swollen forehead, and now, a double chin.

Dad went on collecting bees. He learned a lot as he worked with them. He made lots of mistakes, but he always showed me the right way to do things – after he had found out what that way really was for himself. I took just as much interest in his hobby as he did. And I liked the honey, too. It was so sweet, and each hive gave honey that was different. It really was good!

Soon, Dad had more hives than he should have had in our back yard. Mum often complained that she wasn't able to hang out her washing on a particular day because there were bees buzzing around her. Dad would only tell her that she didn't understand bees, and that they wouldn't really sting her – which was probably correct, but she found that

hard to believe! But he didn't say that any more after she got stung several times in the one day.

Some of our neighbours would occasionally complain about the stings they would receive. But a small jar of honey helped to take some of the pain away. They liked our honey as much as I did.

I got my share of pain from the bees too, but I wasn't going to tell anyone. I knew Mum would get rid of them if she knew. So she didn't find out about all my stings for a long time.

Before the end of the first year, we had twelve beehives—all in our back yard, in the suburbs. Mum, of course, was less impressed than she had been when we had only half that number. The neighbours weren't very happy either. And the Council wasn't very pleased when they learned that we were keeping so many. But I was pleased. And Dad was pleased that he had built up his apiary to the size that he had in such a short time. This gave him a new hobby, and me, a new interest.

We both learned a lot too. Like, how we could best avoid bee stings. We got so many the first few months ...

well, it felt like dozens of them. Dad and I soon found out how we could prevent a lot more. This seemed to work, because after a while we didn't get stung very much. Most of the time our bees stung other people.

We learned how to open the hives without disturbing them, or making them mad. That was easy – a few puffs of smoke from the smoker calmed them down – usually. Sometimes we didn't wait long enough for the smoke to work. We wanted to open the hives and get the honey out. That made the bees cranky, and we got more stings than we expected. But fine days were the best of all for opening the hives. The sunshine seemed to do something for them. Bees are like us – they're in a good mood when the weather's good. If the weather's foul, so are the bees. Like on one Sunday afternoon ... Dad was keen to get some honey out – he had promised his friends at work some, and we didn't have any spare jars to give them. He was trying to beat a thunderstorm we could see coming over the mountains only a few kilometres away. It might have been the feel in the air, or perhaps the bees could hear the thunder. We closed that hive up pretty quickly!

The honey, and Dad's friends, would have to wait until the following weekend ... if there wasn't another thunderstorm then. I agreed with him.

Rough handling always made our bees cranky too—like the time I dropped a whole frame of honey, with bees crawling all over it. As soon as the frame hit the ground, the bees exploded into the air and flew up, buzzing us, trying to sting us. I was frightened at the time, but much more careful after that.

When any of us got stung, we would puff a lot of smoke over our arms or legs near the spot where we got the stings, and, almost at the same time, we'd remove the stings if we could. The smell the sting gives off into the air attracts other bees, and it makes them very angry too. At least the smoke would cover up the smell from the stings and prevent other bees from finding us.

Soon, though, beekeeping became a real pleasure, and most of the pain was gone from it. We weren't frightened of them any more—not like the first time that the swarm came into the back yard and upset our barbecue. That really was frightening! Now, any one of us could walk into the

back yard at almost any time of the day, even when the air seemed full of bees. Like in spring time, when the bees are busy collecting nectar and pollen from the blossoms in the gardens. We would go outside amongst them; the bees would go on collecting the sweetness from the flowers. They were terrific to watch.