

## Pioneer Honey Bees



Did you know that honey bees were unknown on the West Coast until 1853? Honey bees are not even native to the United States. But as early as 1622, the Virginia colony began importing honey bees from Europe. That species quickly spread all over the eastern part of the United States but geography, climate and disease kept the bees there for over 200 hundred years.

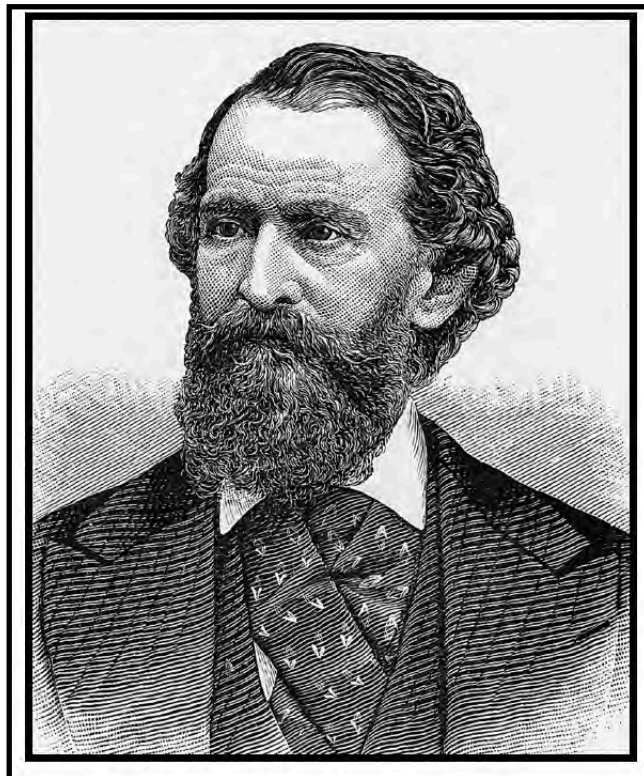
In early 1853, an unknown beekeeper managed to get twelve bee colonies to Panama from New York, he sold them to botanist Christopher A. Shelton. Shelton, in turn, brought them by steamer to San Jose, then by mule to Potrero de Santa Clara where Shelton had settled. Only one hive survived this last journey. Unfortunately, Shelton died in the explosion of the *Jenny Lind* steamship just one month after his bees got to the Rancho.

That one hive quickly multiplied and became three hives. They sold at auction for \$110 each, about 22 times the price of a beehive on the East Coast.

A little closer to home, in 1856 W. B. Hayford and G. D. Hayford of Colfax bought ten swarms of bees in Lewistown Falls, Maine. They paid \$5.00 a swarm. They got them as far as Panama when they found themselves in the middle of the infamous Watermelon Riot of 1856.

The riot began with the simple act of an American refusing to pay a watermelon vendor for a slice of the fruit. A myriad of cultural and economic problems compounded this unfortunate event and set off a riot. The native Panamanians armed themselves with machetes and stones and attacked the Americans. The Americans fought back with guns. Over the course of the melee, two hotels, one store and most of the small American businesses had been destroyed. The riot then moved on to the railroad station. The station was destroyed, tracks removed and the telegraph wires were cut. The Hayford's bee swarms were in a railroad car that was destroyed. The riot ended with deaths on both sides and many wounded. By September, 160 American troops occupied the area to maintain the safety of Americans passing through.

The Hayfords managed to keep the honey they had to feed the bee colonies and brought that back to Marysville where they sold it "very readily at five dollars a pound." Later that same year, W. B. Hayford returned to Maine and bought five more swarms of bees and again brought them through Panama, this time with no trouble. He returned to Colfax and subdivided the swarms. He then sold at least one swarm to John and Harriet Crandall for \$175 a swarm. The Crandalls were among the first agriculturists in Auburn. They had a large parcel of land with extensive gardens right on High Street. They had planted peach and apple trees in 1853 and by 1880 had 17 acres between present day High Street and Pine Street, facing today's State Theater. No doubt the honey bees contributed to the success of the Crandall's farm. They had five acres in apples trees, three acres in cherries and plums, two acres of grapes, as well as a large alfalfa field.



John Riggs Crandall

There are native bees in California, but they are solitary and do not make honey. They are, however, good pollinators, perhaps better than the domesticated honey bees for tomatoes, peaches, huckleberries and manzanita.



A black-tailed bumble bee (*Bombus melanopygus*) on a shooting star (*Primula* sp.) in Yosemite National Park. Photo: Michelle Duennes

For sources that informed this story , see *Pacific Rural Press* 2 Nov, 1889 for the Hayfords account of bringing bees to Colfax. For general information on honey bees, see [Cnps.org/flora](http://Cnps.org/flora), [arboretum.ucdavis.edu](http://arboretum.ucdavis.edu), [planetbee.org](http://planetbee.org), [atlasobscura.com/place/first-honey-bees](http://atlasobscura.com/place/first-honey-bees). For the Watermelon Riot see Wikipedia for a general overview and the *Encyclopedia of Latin American History* p. 424-425 and the *Hispanic American Historical Review* Feb. 1, 1990 p. 85-108. For the Crandalls see Thompson and West p. 370 and *Auburn Dry Diggings and Water* by John Knox.

Thanks to John Knox for once again finding and sharing this great little piece of our history!

April McDonald-Loomis