

About the North-Eastern Apiarists' Association of Victoria Incorporated

A brief history 1955- 2005

Today, the NEAAVinc celebrates its 50th Annual Conference and the Anniversary of its inaugural conference of May, 1955.

It is appropriate, even if a little indulgent, to fleet on the origins of the association and record some of what the association has achieved over the half century, before these foot prints wash away in the sands of time.

This is the story of self made men and women who, while pulling themselves up by their own boot straps, in times very different from the modern era, recognised the need to band together and voluntarily work with a common will towards making their lot a better one, a better one for their fellow beekeepers, and for the unique craft and industry to which they belonged. It is a story of successful men and women, who often triumphing over considerable hardships and adversity, created something out of nothing, a small regional Association of members which served their needs, the needs of those who have followed, and in doing so served the needs of the wider industry. The Association's battle cry, "FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF APICULTURE", adopted so long ago has been faithfully followed throughout the journey until this day, the dawning of the Association's 50th year.

North-Eastern Victoria has a long tradition of beekeeping, similar to some other regions of the state and nation.

By the 1870's naturalised European honey bees were well established in most forest systems, and settlers began to harvest bush honey from hives they came across as they cleared the land. Some settlers began to accumulate small apiaries near their homes, and thus the genesis of a honey bee industry began to evolve.

By the 1880's, demand for beekeeping equipment had grown to such an extent that beekeeping supplies businesses became established in metropolitan and rural areas including the north east, and buyers of honey and bees wax began to purchase supplies and operate on the domestic and export markets. Old records, detailing the high levels of production of honey per colony that were being achieved, indicate that beekeeping management in progressive operations was of a high standard, and that the eucalypt resource base must still have been magnificent in terms of scale and reliability. By the turn of the century, some large beekeeping businesses were operating 1000 or more colonies.

Bill Frost, his brother Leb, and George Jackel were already running large apiaries in the north east during that era, their descendants becoming stalwarts of the Association, some of whom are operating today. The Johnson's of Milawa also operated an outstanding apiary at the turn of the century, as did Fred Foster of Myrrhee.

Fred was the son of Kate Kelly, and he was continuing a family tradition. Fred who later joined the First A.I.F, was killed in France during the First World War of 1914-18. His cousin, Walter Griffiths, who lived nearby, by then had also become interested in honeybees, and he went on to become a prominent and successful migratory beekeeper.

His son Paul continues the business at Wangaratta today, becoming a foundation member of the NEAAVinc on the way.

After the Second World War, a booming national economy and rapidly improving technology stimulated commercial beekeeping. The membership of principal state beekeeping associations, most of whom had been established around the turn of the 19th century were also stimulated, and the idea of strengthening regional representation, particularly to handle local issues, became more appealing.

In Victoria, there had always been strong representation and support for the Victorian Apiarists' Association [VAA] from the north east of the state. By 1954, some movers and shakers in the north-east like Athol Jackel and Kevin Jackel, Ernie McKenna, Stan Carney, Fred Sargent, Bruce Kirkwood, Bill Robinson, Bill Viogt, Charlie Phillips, Harold Chapple, Alan Frost, Merv Vonarx, George Murphy and others could see advantage in establishing a regional north-eastern association which, while remaining supportive of the state peak body, could deliver additional benefits to the beekeepers of the north east.

Kevin Jackel, and Stan Carney of Albury, were already operating substantial honey packing floors, Kevin going on in pre Capilano days to become the most prominent honey exporter in Victoria, opening up markets for Australian honey in Japan, and supplying the Middle East, United Kingdom, and Germany.

After a series of meetings in the region to test the level of support among local beekeepers, and with the blessing of the VAA, in 'May 1955, the historic inaugural conference of the NEAAV convened in the Country Women's Association Hall Templeton Street, Wangaratta. Bill Robinson, a leading beekeeper from Beechworth, became the inaugural President, and a young George Murphy, another second generation beekeeper from Wodonga, became inaugural Secretary. Bill was the uncle of brothers Alan and Keith Robinson, who were also to become large commercial beekeepers at Beechworth, and members of the NEAAV. Alan's daughter and son-in-law, Jodie and Steven Goldsworthy, honey packers and apiarists from Corowa, retain a strong affiliation with the NEAAV.

Surviving foundation members of the NEAAV, some with us here today include Paul Griffiths, George Murphy, Athol Jackel and Linton Briggs. Paul, Athol and George are foundation executive members, Paul serving continuously on the executive since 1955.

The vision of the founding members made its mark in the history of beekeeping in this state, as the NEAAV became the first of many regional bodies to be established, all now constitutionally recognised by the VAA in one form or another, and all working together for the advancement of apiculture in this state and nation.

The tide of enthusiasm which established the NEAAV has been maintained throughout its journey over the last half century. Every public organisation that relies on the financial support of its members must earn the right to continue to exist. On this score, the NEAAV measures up with some distinction.

In its early years, at a time when the Australian beekeeping industry was responding to the stimulation of improving technology and the need to do something cohesively meaningful about organised marketing and research, the NEAAV decided to do something about bringing people together to share ideas, to have the opportunity to see first hand new technologies, to meet experts in various fields of Apiculture, and so on. It did this from 1956 onwards for 15 years by staging large annual field days at various locations in the north east such as East Shepparton, Strathmerton, Staghorn Flat [lower Kiewa Valley], Glenrowan, Cohuna and Wangaratta.

The Glenrowan field days, held between and including 1959-1967, developed into notable events on the Australian beekeeping calendar, the largest in 1964 attracting 1400 Victorian, Interstate and International visitors. An idea of the 'international flavour of these events may be gauged by the calibre of field day presenters engaged by the NEAAV, in addition to the best contributors in their chosen fields available in Australia. Some international presenters were:

Dr Harold Dade. United Kingdom. - Bee anatomy and Research.

Dr. Eva Crane. United Kingdom. - International Bee Research Association.

Dr. Bill Stephen. USA. Dept of Agriculture - Research and Extension.

Dr. Eckert. USA. -Bee Disease and Research.

Dr. Palmer-Jones. New Zealand.- Pesticide use inAgricultllre and Regulation.

Everett Hastings. Canada. - Honeybee Genetic Improvement .in Caucasian Bees.

Kevin and Sandy Ecroyd. New Zealand - Alliance Equipment Supplies.

During the 1950's, agitation within the Australian industry for improved, formal honey marketing arrangements were mooted in various forms. Towards the end of the decade, the vision of a Queensland beekeeper, Mr Keith Mitchell OBE, began to crystalize. Keith was invited by the NEAAV to speak at a field day at Glenrowan, where his vision, the two point Mitchell plan, could be canvassed and discussed before a widely representative audience.

In 1962, the Commonwealth Government, on the petition of Australia's producers through its national peak body, the Federal Council of Australian Apiarists' Associations [FCAAA] legislated to establish the Australian Honey Board

[AHB], to regulate honey exports, and to promote the consumption of honey in the domestic and export markets, funded by a levy on production. The Commonwealth appointed Keith as the Board's inaugural chairman, presiding over the realisation of his vision, the two point plan.

In 1963, coinciding with the NEAAV annual field day of that year held at Glenrowan, the newly appointed AHB members, representative of each state, attended the field day, and held the first Board meeting of its more than three decades of office, at nearby Wangaratta.

In 1963, the NEAAV also decided that something more needed to happen in Australia about establishing improved strains of honey bees. A NEAAV executive member, Alan Frost, of Albury, who had worked in Canada as a departmental apiary officer, suggested it may be worthwhile to see if Everett Hastings of Saskatchewan in Canada, the world's foremost breeder and improver of caucasian honey bees, would be interested in visiting Australia, and be a guest presenter at the 1964 field day at Glenrowan.

The NEAAV executive adopted the idea, but went further and resolved to enquire of Mr Hastings if he would be interested in leading a breeding project in north east Victoria during the season of 1964-65, based on his program's bloodlines, fully sponsored by the NEAAV. Linton Briggs, Secretary of the NEAAV at the time during his overall stint of 9 years in that office, set about the task of negotiating with Mr Hastings.

The deal was that his travel to and from Canada, his accommodation, internal travel, out of pocket expenses, and remuneration for the season would be funded by the NEAAV. The Association would take orders from Australian beekeepers for sales of queens from the project, and use the proceeds to fund the project. All materials including the use of an apiary would be provided by the Association.

Mr Hastings agreed, and the rest is history. Breeding stock were imported from Canada, the breeding apiary was located at Boorhaman near Wangaratta, at the premises of NEAAV executive members Fred and Beryl Sargent. NEAAV members loaned many hundreds of mating nuclei, and many hundreds of voluntary hours of effort were given by members and others to help make the project an outstanding success. 5000 top quality Hastings caucasian queen bees were delivered to beekeepers in all Australian states. For the first time for many, beekeepers were able to appreciate what an impact high quality, genetically improved honeybees could have on the management and productivity of an apiary. Fred and Beryl's contribution was pivotal to the success of the project. Their commitment remains forever etched in the annals of the NEAAV.

The following year, 1965-66, the Association again successfully sponsored Mr Hastings under the same arrangements. In 1969-70, he again returned, entering a joint commercial venture with Fred. Among other benefits, the project established Fred Sargent as a supplier of quality untested caucasian queen bees to Australian beekeepers for many years.

During the 1960's decade, the NEAAV embarked on a systematic survey of north eastern Victorian forests to record the productive value of respective forest systems to the industry in terms of honey production, colony maintenance, wintering, rehabilitation, and the frequency of usage. The need for reliable statistical data to help prosecute the industry's case to retain optimum access to public land forests had been becoming increasingly apparent to the NEAAV.

Jack Rufforde-Sharpe, long serving departmental apiary officer stationed at Wangaratta, took a great interest in this long term project, and rendered valuable assistance to an exercise which became a forerunner of others across the state.

The experience of assembling such information meant that the NEAAV was able to hit the ground running when in 1970, the enactment of legislation by the state government established the Victorian Land Conservation Council, [LCC] whose charter was to systematically investigate and periodically review the future usage of all public land in the state, and to develop final recommendations for consideration by the government as investigations and reviews were completed. Only under exceptional circumstances would alienation of public land for agricultural purposes, be considered.

The development of the LCC through the 1960's had been monitored closely by the NEAAV and the VAA. The industry quickly realised that here at last was a public land management planning mechanism that would give the beekeeping industry the opportunity to have its views about public land management and user access fairly heard, along with every other interest group.

Over the next two and a half decades, participation in the process of investigation by the LCC served the NEAAV and the wider industry well, resulting in levels and security of access to public land forests by the industry that otherwise may not have been achievable.

Today, this historic NEAAV 50th Anniversary Conference will be officially opened by Ian Miles, Director of Forests Management, Victoria. Ian was formerly a principal LCC investigating officer with whom the NEAAV worked closely for many years, who earned the respect of the Association as an able and fair administrator, and who today we welcome back to the north east.

In 1977, in South Australia, European Foul Brood [EFB] was first diagnosed in Australia. Later in 1977 the honey bee ailment was diagnosed in Victorian hives. The New South Wales, [NSW], Dept. of Agriculture, anxious to contain the highly contagious organism from spreading further northwards into NSW, established a bee free zone between the Murray River state border and an arbitrary line further north that included most of NEAAV members' traditional early to late spring build-up country.

The action by the NSW Department, understandable in the circumstances of wanting to hold the line against the advancing threat to NSW beekeepers, created great anxiety among Victorian beekeepers who perceived their livelihoods being severely affected by the proclamation.

The matter came to a head in July 1978 when five north eastern beekeepers, all members of the NEAAV, were arraigned before the Albury [NSW] Court of Petty Sessions on charges of having allegedly kept bees in a NSW bee free zone. These were stressful times for the beekeepers concerned and for the wider industries of both NSW and Victoria and their respective departments, because the beekeeping fraternity of Australia, was and remains a close knit one, where all participants are colleagues with similar aspirations.

The NEAAV lent considerable moral support to the members concerned, and advisory support to legal counsel retained to defend their case. This was a special case. The contagious nature of EFB would mean that very quickly, the incursion would become endemic to all eastern states, no matter what restriction applied, and in the mean time industry members' economic and operational viability would be severely damaged by the restriction.

The outcome of the Court proceedings was that the presiding magistrate dismissed the charges, because the proclamation enactment by the NSW Government was outside the provisions of the NSW Apiary Act. Soon after the case, EFB became endemic to NSW and Queensland and all parties moved on from the crisis, all a little wiser as a result of the traumatic experience.

1977 also saw the advent of the CSIRO's proposal to release imported biological control agents in Australia to control echium weed species [Patterson's curse] become an issue for industry. There were three epicentres of industry support for its position in the very public debate - the mid north of South Australia, the southern tablelands of NSW, and north eastern Victoria. The debate reached epic proportions in terms of the effort required to sustain representation over eleven years at the highest levels in the land, eventually reaching the High Court of Australia, where it remained for many years until resolution. Questioning the planned release of the biological control agents with the Commonwealth, CSIRO, state governments, and other sections of primary industry over such a long period with limited financial resources at the industry's disposal, was made possible because of the sound strategic position adopted by the national peak industry body, FCAAA, at the outset.

Needing to avert as much as possible alienation of the inherent goodwill farmers had for beekeepers, rather than declare opposition to the release of agents, the NEAAV formulated a strategy to simply question whether the release of agents to control Patterson's curse would be in the overall public interest, given the amount of credible evidence that demonstrated Patterson's curse as a pasture component, was on balance more a contributor to primary production, and therefore the public benefit, than a detractor. Support for the strategy by the VAA, NSW Apiarists' Association

[NSWAA], and the South Australian Apiarists' Association [SAAA], led to the adoption of the strategy by the national peak body FCAAA, and sustained the industry's legal direction of its action throughout its passage through the South Australian Supreme Court and the High Court of Australia.

The initial successful injunction application that prevented the release of the agents was heard by Sir Ninian Stephen, who was later to become Australia's Governor-General. He found that a case of sufficient merit had been established by the industry, pending further legal process. Defendant in the action was CSIRO. Four plaintiffs were secured, two beekeepers, and two farmers, from NSW, Victoria and South Australia.

Paul Griffiths, NEAAV executive member, volunteered to become the Victorian beekeeper plaintiff, joining the other plaintiffs in their exceptional roles of responsibility, embarking on behalf of their industry colleagues on a profound journey through clearly uncharted water, the consequences of which were unknown.

In 1980, Linton Briggs, another NEAAV executive member, was elected chairman of the national peak industry body, FCAAA. During his term of office, which extended for 8 years, he presided over most of the industry's involvement in the patterson's curse biological control issue. The strength of the industry's case throughout the legal process led to the Court awarding costs to the plaintiffs from time to time. Given the limited financial resources available, this also was a significant factor in the industry being able to sustain the action.

In 1984, the Commonwealth passed legislation to establish the Biological Control Act. The action had exposed deficiencies in the laws of the land regarding appropriate public consultation by government agencies before embarking on biological programs of any sort. In this action therefore, CSIRO had been unfortunately placed in an untenable position, having to defend an action because of legislative deficiencies. For the record, it must be said that throughout the action, in all its dealings with the FCAAA and industry at large, CSIRO acted with the utmost decorum. The passing of the Act meant that never again however, could a biological control program be legally implemented without there first being an adequate public consultation process.

Later in the decade, the Victorian state government announced it intended to mount a biological control program for patterson's curse in the state. In the end, faced with the prospect of having to concurrently manage a second front, and to continue to find ways and means to fund the actions, the weary industry troops decided to withdraw from the High Court proceedings, and not to proceed to question the Victorian government's intention.

So ended a chapter in the history of Australian apiculture in which the NEAAV was deeply involved, and which for a decade echoed throughout the corridors of governments and other places of power. Out of it all came enduring respect for a small industry of limited resources but with enormous integrity, tackling some of the most powerful forces in the land, predicating their case on a position which to the end was unassailable. The NEAAV is proud of the part it played in this epic episode.

Entering the 1990's decade, the defining hallmarks of NEAAV function has continued to be its work on behalf of members to maintain historic levels of access for beekeepers to north eastern forests, both state forests and parks. Resources conservation and access, and the successful marketing of products harvested from the resources, as perceived by the NEAAV, are the two fundamental issues pegs on which hang all of the industry's present and future aspirations. Many are the other risks and issues that will emerge or continue to threaten industry viability that will need to be effectively managed, but the two fore mentioned issues have been the dominant issues perceived by the NEAAV to keep on track.

The NEAAV, over its fifty years journey, has been able to maintain its historic levels of access and in some cases, expand its levels of access to native forests. It has achieved this by maintaining close contact with land managers, by working hard at establishing good personal relationships with managers and staff, and by making sure the industry's case for access is well articulated, and well understood.

A high priority of NEAAV function has been to be supportive of the state peak body. Although never taking the opportunity to become a member body of the VAA, it is never the less formally affiliated with the state association. Most members are VAA members. On all state wide or national issues, the NEAAV makes its contribution to policy

development through the VAA table. A measure of the kind of NEAAV support for the VAA over the years can be gauged by the following particulars:

- 10 NEAAV members have served as VAA President.
- 19 NEAAV members have served as VAA Executive members.
- 2 NEAAV members have served as VAA Secretary.
- 3 NEAAV members have served as Australian Bee Journal Editor. [VAA publication]
- 12 NEAAV members have served as a Victorian delegate to the National peak body of the day.
- 2 NEAAV members have served as VAA Resources Committee Chairperson.
- 1 NEAAV member is a Life member of the VAA .

NEAAV members deserving of special mention for long service to the VAA executive council include:

Elwyne Papworth, Ernie McKenna, Charlie Phillips and his son Ray Phillips, Des Nicel, Athol Jackel, Kevin Jackel, and Linton Briggs. Linton has served for 37 years.

In addition 4 NEAAV members, Ray Phillips, Kevin Jackel, Athol Jackel and Linton Briggs, went on to serve as National President of Australia's apiculture industry peak body and Peter Titcumb served a year as Secretary. Linton also went on to serve the peak body as Secretary and Chief Executive Officer for a period of 17 years. In recognition of service rendered, in 1988 Linton was the recipient of the Goodacre Memorial Award, and in 1989 was nominated for membership in the General Division of the Order Of Australia. Currently, NEAAV member, Craig Scott, is Chairman of the Crop Pollination Association, [CPA], a member body of the Australian Honey Bee Industry Council [AHBIC] and represents the CPA on that body's executive committee.

The foregoing account chronicles some of the mile stones of achievement by the NEAAV and its members. Many more are the stories that can be told, many are the names of the members not mentioned who all made valuable contributions to their association and industry. In a fuller account of the life and times of the NEAAV, their contributions would be properly acknowledged and applauded.

Even so, it would be remiss of this account not to acknowledge the contribution made by the current secretary, Elwyne Papworth. First appointed in 1989-90, Elwyne has served in that capacity since then. Her contribution is another example of the sort of selfless motivation that has marked the efforts of so many who have gone before. For some years, Elwyne was chairperson of the VAA Royal Melbourne Show Committee and this year has again been appointed to head this important industry promotion and VAA fund raising initiative.

Displayed in this room today is the Association's Board of Honour. Members and visitors are encouraged to spend some time in its presence, and quietly reflect on the names of persons there recorded, many of them here today in spirit only.

Linton Briggs, May 7th 2004.