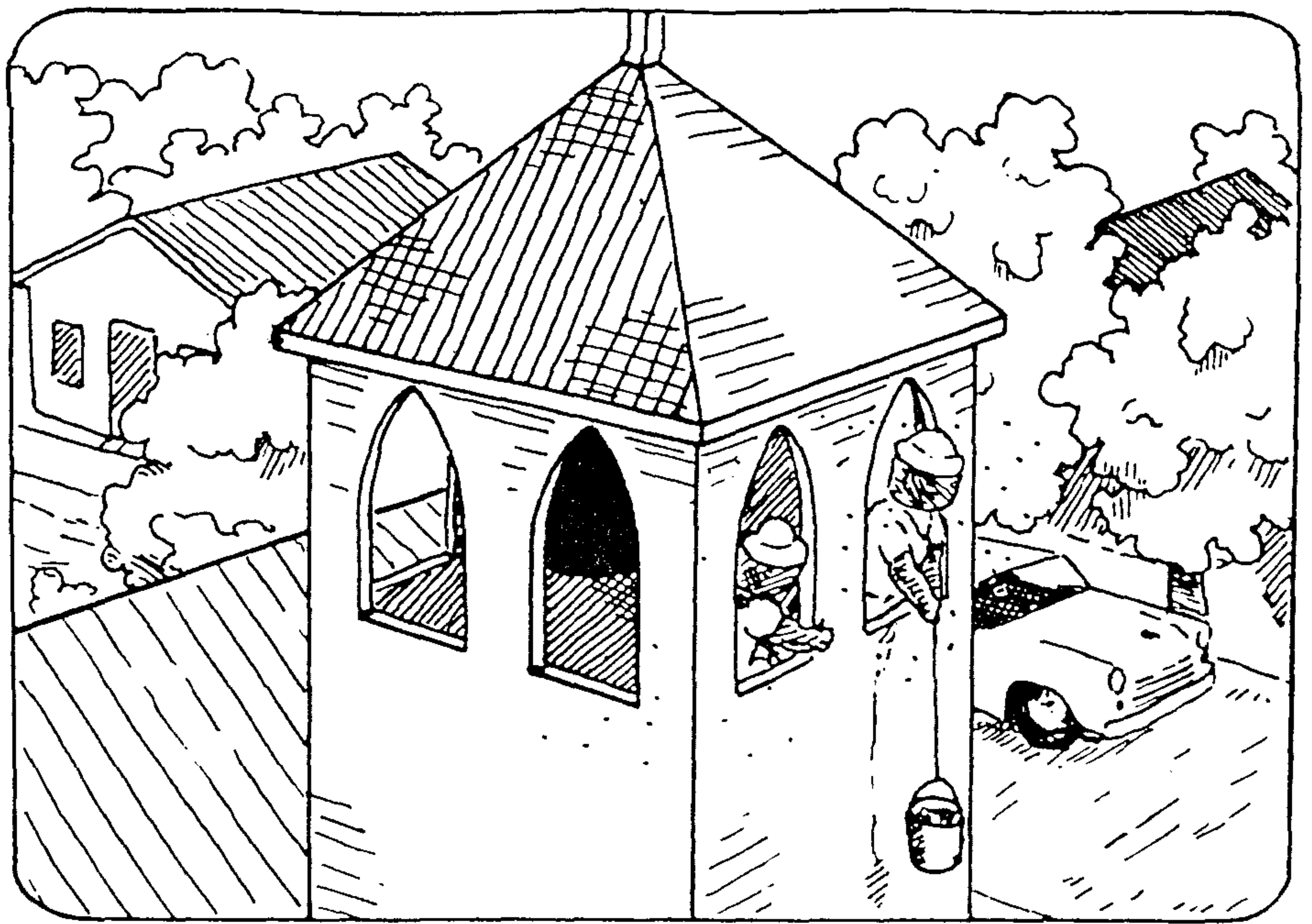


Bees in the Belfry



Bee-deviled in South America

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FROM 1982-1984 I served as a Peace Corps volunteer on the Santa Elena Peninsula of Ecuador in South America. The Santa Elena Peninsula, a semi-arid area in the southwest of Ecuador had never been able to support the temperate-evolved strain of European bees. African bees, which were better adapted to the zone, had gained a foothold, but remained more-or-less inconspicuous. However, beginning in December of 1982, inordinate rains began to fall in the area (3 meters for an area that usually received 65 cm). By the end of the rainy season the increased precipitation had produced copious vegetative growth. The corresponding appearance of large quantities of melliferous flowers was very quickly exploited by the bees, producing a tremendous number of new colonies — and errant swarms seeking appropriate nesting sites.

I was working on a forestry project in Colonche, a small coastal village. I had made the acquaintance of several carpenters, in particular the *maestro*, Victor, who were working on the restoration of the town's church, which dated back to Spanish colonial times. Their work was hampered by several colonies of bees which had taken up residence in the ramparts and bell tower of the church. Each time the carpenters ascended the roof or tower and began hammering they were driven out by the bees. In fact, services could no longer be held in the church because the vibrations set up by the singing of hymns would incite the bees to sting the congregation. (Some people

believed this had something to do with the old parish priest who had recently been murdered in a seedy motel room in a distant town — because of their chastity and their cloistered industry bees have long had religious and portentous associations.) The carpenters were preparing to poison the colonies to facilitate their work. I suggested the possibility of robbing out the colonies instead and perhaps starting a beekeeping project. The carpenters seemed quite interested.

I was acquainted with another forestry volunteer, Mike, who had experience as a beekeeper. Mike had demonstrated the use of two types of hives, the Kenya top-bar hive and the Langstroth hive at a recent service conference. The Kenya top-bar hive (KTBH) was cheaper and easier to use and did not require all the accoutrements of extractor, foundation wax, wire, etc. Although the KTBH is a more labor intensive system, labor is a very cheap input in Ecuador, as in most parts of the developing world, as compared to the capital investment necessary for the Langstroth system. I talked this over with the carpenters who were eager to try their hands at beekeeping if it didn't prove too risky to life, limb or pocketbook. So, they decided to build a few Kenya top-bar hives.

Even the KTBH would require some beeswax for use as starter guides and bait and there was none available at local markets. Robbing out the colonies in the church would provide the wax, and the bonus of some honey, if it were

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done without the use of pesticides.

I contacted Mike who came to visit, bringing his beekeeping equipment and protective clothing. Over a weekend I had the protective clothing copied by a seamstress in town and Mike and I were able to build several KTBH's which the carpenters would later duplicate.

Early one morning, after all the preparations had been made, Mike and I began robbing the colonies in the church's bell tower. The carpenters watched the proceedings ensconced under a plastic tarp on a landing below where we were slowly smoking the colonies and cutting out comb. Comb with only honey went in one bucket and that with brood into another. This was my first experience working with bees and I found it fascinating and exhilarating to be among thousands of the loudly buzzing African bees, particularly since we each received hundreds of "false stings," our thick clothing ameliorating the full effect of the barbed attacks. However, the bees soon became disoriented and relatively docile as we wreaked havoc on their nest structure. After the initial onslaughts, we could work relatively unmolested.

We removed three colonies with little problem and began trying to loosen boards away from the wall to get at a fourth — with no success. A crow-bar was acquired from the carpenters and we made several unsuccessful attempts to pry out the adamant 200-year-old tropical hardwood boards that concealed our quarry. Half in jest and half in frustration I began using the crow-bar as a battering ram shouting:

"Fee, fi, foe, fum,
I smell the brood of some
africans,
Be they a hive or a bees'
nest instead,
I'll use their honey to
soak my bread."

(What I *really* said wasn't nearly so lyrical, but nor would it be printable.) The blows to break into the space between the walls fell in beat with the doggerel. At last one board split with a resounding retort that revealed an extensive cavity formed where the back wall of the bell tower met at the cornice of the church's roof. Just within was a colony that seemed bigger than the previous three combined!

The comb went so far back into the cavity that the knife we'd been using wasn't long enough to reach in and cut it from the roof. I descended the tower to the landing where the carpenters had been hiding so we could borrow a machete. No one was there. I left the tower and the church and stepped into the town square. No people were in sight, only a few burros and goats that were running around biting at themselves. The bees from the last and largest colony were making a concerted last stand, zipping about wildly and stinging anything that moved! The rhythmic blows to break out the boards had been just the thing to incite the bees into a frenzied fury before we could get at them with subduing smoke.

"Mike," I said, "we might as well take off our clothes and let the bees kill us, because if they don't, the townspeople are going to."

Standing there in what seemed a ghost town I was reminded of countless old westerns in which the big showdown takes place in hastily deserted streets quite similar to this one. Only the tumbleweeds were missing. And the bad-guys only got one shot a piece — and were bad-girls besides. The windows of the houses were all closed and the curtains drawn. I had never seen the windows closed in the hot coastal village and was surprised to see that they even had glass. Finally, I heard someone hissing to get my attention from behind a door, only barely opened to avoid "drawing fire." It was Victor. I went over and entered the house just as the carpenter took a sting above the eye. I cringed as much as he did. "*Las abejas son muy bravas,*" I said. "*Si,*" said Victor, "they killed two burros and a pig." I was dumbstruck, a new round of sweat poured from my pores, drenched as I was already from the heat and exertion. I quickly asked for the machete and returned to the tower.

"Mike," I said once I had rejoined the fracas, "we might as well take off our clothes and let the bees kill us, because if they don't, the townspeople

are going to." I explained how everyone had been driven indoors and that the bees had killed a couple of the domestic animals. In gloomy silence Mike and I finished robbing the hives. Afterwards we shared a cigarette from a package we found on the carpenters' work table (I had never smoked before, but it seemed the thing for a doomed man to do). We decided that it would cost us each three months of our modest living allowance to pay for the two burros and pig.

Mike and I approached the house where the carpenters were holed up, once the bees had calmed down a bit — now that their combs were gone and their colony organization had been broken up, they really had nothing to defend and were just flying around dazedly. I asked the carpenters how much we owed the owners for the burros and pig. They appeared confused.

I asked, "Didn't the bees kill two burros and a pig?"

"Ohhh," said Victor, "that happened when we tried to take out the colonies."

So, far from being the villains we'd thought, we turned out to be the heroes who had exorcised the church from its bee-deviling inhabitants. As most everyone in town watched, Mike and I, the carpenters and the new parish priest squeezed out the combs and filtered the honey that had been harvested. A bottle of honey was given to everyone in the town. Afterwards, the combs were melted down and the wax purified for use in the hives — and the carpenters built a great number of KTBH's from funds provided by the agency sponsoring the reconstruction of the church — the reasoning being that if bait hives were made available to the roving swarms of bees searching for appropriate nesting sites, they would tend to arrive less in the church. Beekeeping was begun in an area where it had previously been unknown and, well, basically, everybody lived happily ever after.

For more information about Peace Corps' Beekeeping program write to:

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or call (toll-free): 800-484-8580 or look up the local recruiting office under the government listings in your telephone directory. ●