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City girl finds a 'sweet'
deal in honey business

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A Sweet deal

Hettinger woman sells honey worldwide



By Rick Killion

"I never, ever thought I would live in a small town, but I love it here."

That statement summarizes a move that Sharon Schwahn made in 1999 when this Bismarck (ND) native put down roots in Hettinger, ND and rapidly established herself as one of the local honey industry's biggest advocates.

Founder, owner, and manager of the American Honey Company, Schwahn got 'hooked on honey' and beekeeping through her relationship with Wes Edwards, one of several apiary owners in the Hettinger area ... including operators like Grand River, Hettinger Honey Company, Red Dot Apiaries, and Wayne Laufer.

"I met Wes in 1998 and really took to the work in the fields and bee yards, moving the bees at night, re-queening the hives, and checking for bee mites," Schwahn recounts with fondness. "We lost nearly 40 percent of our bees to mites in 2004, which was good ... anything under 50 percent loss was considered a victory back then."

After graduating from the University of Mary as a nurse and working in a Bismarck retirement center (something she still does on occasion in Hettinger), Schwahn began her venture into the honey business with six hives of her own that Edwards provided as a gift, and she has acquired another 18 for a total of 24 hives.



(Photo by Vance Vannote)

The output of those hives amount to about 1,000 pounds of pure, sweet honey every year, and the quality of the honey has made converts of honey fanatics all over North America.

"There's one customer in Texas who orders 10 pounds every other month," she acknowledges with transparent pride. "He says he can't eat Texas honey anymore since he's eaten ours. Part of what's helped me in my direct retail sales is my membership in the Pride of Dakota program, my Web site, and the variety of honey-based products we provide. I'm setting up some automated equipment for bottling and I've got a distributor in Bismarck who helps me fill orders."

The clover and alfalfa in western North Dakota apparently generates exceptional honey, according to Shwahn, because her American Honey Company products are considered top of the line to customers as far away as Alaska and Hawaii. Selling containers of assorted sizes and blends directly and through gift shops, she admits that her "whipped honey is probably my best."

"We try to use everything in some way or another," she observes. "I hired a lady to play around with different formulas of lotions and balms made with honey and beeswax."

Shwahn's diligence and enthusiasm for beekeeping and honey earned her the title of beekeeper of the quarter last year from the National Honey Board. She is active in the North Dakota Beekeeping Association and a regular at all four of the Pride of Dakota shows each fall.

"I don't want to get as big as a Sioux Bee honey company," she says, "but I want to get as much honey out there as possible so more people can enjoy it. I've gotten into gift shops in the Black Hills, Kansas City, and the Fargo-Moorhead area, and I've got three products sold as part of the Sakakawea marketing program related to the Lewis & Clark events. Who would have thought it could be this much fun?" (www.americanhoneycompany.com)