



~ A Short History of Hofmann Farm and The Hofmann Apiaries ~

# Hofmann Farm

## VALENTINE AND ROSALIA HOFMANN

The first record of the land its present owners call Hofmann Farm is the Bounty Land Patent dated November 1, 1859, and signed by President James Buchanan granting 160 acres to one Joseph Crown for his service in the war with Mexico (figure 1). The first 40 acres of Hofmann Farm was purchased by Valentine Hofmann in 1873 from the third owner of this parcel, Edward Prouty.

Valentine Hofmann was born February 13, 1846, in Moravia, a region of Central Europe. He immigrated to the United States, likely from Bohemia, sometime in 1871. Quoting from an autobiography written by his grandson Charles Hofmann:

“Friends living near Elysian who had preceded Valentine to America had urged him to come to Minnesota. So he came, traveling to Minnesota by train and getting off at Janesville, which then was almost as far as the line went.

At that time no roads worthy of the name existed, and most travel was by heavy wagons or carts pulled by ox or horse teams. Few, however, could afford such conveniences, and as early settlers had little or no occasion to travel anywhere except between their homes and trading centers, much travel was by foot. After spending a few days in Janesville, Valentine shouldered his baggage and started out on foot through the heavy virgin woods along the east shore of Lake Elysian, with the village of Elysian his destination.\* Elysian was located on the north shore of the lake, seven miles distant. The lake guided his direction, but as there was not even a foot path to follow it took an entire day to make the journey. Fallen trees, underbrush, and depressions filled with water meant continual detours from the direct course, which added to the distance he needed to travel. At twilight he finally came upon the little cluster of log cabins that marked the town of Elysian.”

\* At the time of Valentine’s arrival, the town now named Elysian was called Logan, platted in 1857. The name was changed to Elysian in 1883; the name of the lake was originally Okaman Lake and was changed to Lake Elysian at the same time. Valentine would have passed within a mile of the land he was to purchase a couple of years later on his walk along the eastern edge of Okaman Lake.



figure 1. Original Land Patent granting Joseph Crown the land from which Valentine Hofmann eventually purchased 40 acres.

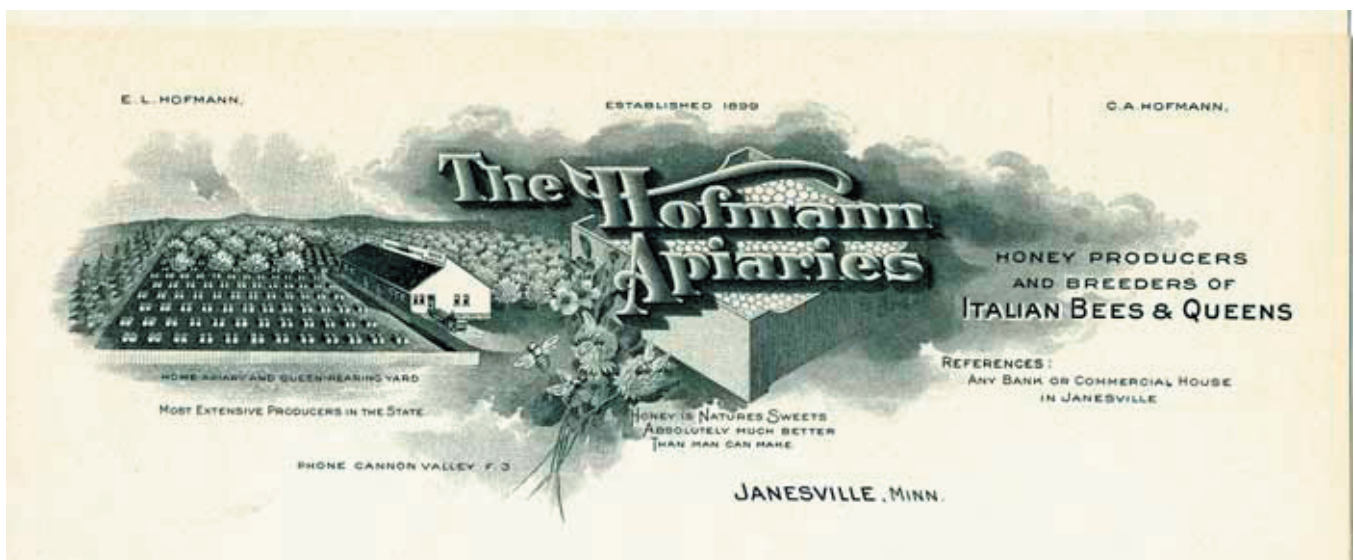


figure 2. The original Hofmann Apiaries letterhead, designed by Emil Hofmann, showing the business established in 1899.



Valentine was a miller by trade and soon found employment at the Okaman Flour Mill in the village of Okaman which was a short distance east of Logan. Once settled in his job and having obtained a place to live near the mill, he sent for his fiancée, Rosalia Frodl, who was still living in Moravia. Nearly as soon as she arrived Valentine and Rosalia were married. The ceremony took place on June 9, 1872, in St. Jarleth Catholic Church which still stands and is located in Iosco Township, Waseca County. The church was newly built, and Valentine and Rosalia were the first couple to be married there.

Working in dusty, confined spaces as he had been for a good share of his young life began taking a toll on Valentine's health, and not long after he and Rosalia married he realized he had to leave his trade as a miller and find another way to make a living. Rosalia had had some farming experience in Moravia, and Valentine had learned much about farming through conversations with farmers that came to the mill. They were both young, hard workers willing to take a chance, and on December 8, 1873, they bought 40 acres of land in Janesville Township, about halfway between Logan and Janesville.

The initial 40 acres consisted of virgin forest, and only five acres had been cleared. There was a small, one-room log cabin in the clearing and that's where they began their new lives.\* Their lives were the lives of pioneers: spare, difficult, with very little comfort or convenience, and financially precarious. They gardened, raised a few meager crops, and began to clear the land. They also started a family, and over the next several years they had four boys: Emil, Henry, Adolph, and Julius.

Valentine and Rosalia worked hard, saved money, and made enough progress so that in 1875 they had the confidence to purchase an additional 60 acres. The new tract also had approximately 20 acres of permanent wet-land that included open water in the form of a "mud lake." By 1884 the farm was successful enough that they were finally able to build a simple frame house to replace the log cabin they'd lived in for ten years.

The last years of the century went well for the Hofmanns. The land was mostly cleared, machinery was being added, debts were being reduced, and the family was enjoying the new house. However, tragedy struck one winter day when Valentine was hauling some logs to a sawmill in a bob sled with a team of horses: something spooked the horses and they bolted. In his effort to control the horses he was thrown from his seat and run over by the sled. Though he survived the accident, he was badly injured and perhaps never fully recovered. He eventually developed cancer, and after suffering for months he died on April 29, 1900, at age 54.

#### EMIL AND CLARA (STERLING) HOFMANN AND THE BEGINNING OF HOFMANN APIARIES

By 1900 all four boys had left the farm, and Rosalia found herself alone. Emil, however, being the only one among the four brothers with any interest in the farm, decided to take over for his mother, and he returned home from California where he had been working. He apparently entered farming with enthusiasm and continued on the path started by Valentine. This consisted of growing corn and grain, and tending a few cows. He also

\* The cabin was so small that when Valentine once accepted a rocking chair from a furniture maker in trade for a load of wood he couldn't otherwise sell, he tied it to the rafters as it would take up too much space in the room.

borrowed money to construct a hog barn and began raising purebred Chester White pigs. Then one day in 1902 or 1903, fate intervened: a swarm of honey bees chanced to make a temporary landing on a small bush close to the house.\* Emil was fascinated by this, and using some materials at hand, he hurriedly fashioned a sort of hive and watched excitedly as the bees crawled into it. At that point Emil had unwittingly changed the course of his life and launched what was to become The Hofmann Apiaries, a business that would last nearly 85 years.

An accounting of the first few years of having bees on the farm is not very complete, but with what is known and some speculation a fair picture can be produced. The intervening years between hiving the swarm and the year 1907 were likely years of much learning about bees, how to manage them and harvest their production (figures 3–5).



figure 3. Earliest known photograph of the Hofmann farm taken August 24, 1907. The original hog barn is in the foreground just right of center. The photo would probably have been taken shortly before the hog barn was converted to a honey house.

\* The actual date of this event is uncertain. In his autobiography Charles states the year was 1902 or 1903. However, the letterhead for Hofmann Apiaries (figure 2) shows the date established as 1899. Among other things, it is known that Emil had a flair for marketing. Two examples: photos showing a truck marked "No. 2" when he owned but one, and a promotional photo showing the home yard with many hives, some of which were empty hive covers; the empty covers were intended to inflate the apparent size of the operation at that time. It seems possible that Emil may have had his reasons for establishing the originating date of Hofmann Apiaries as before the turn of the century.





figure 4. Emil tending his bees in the home yard with Rosalia in the background picking blueberries. 1907



figure 5. Emil, Clara and baby Gretchen in the home yard. 1907



Besides working with the bees there were still the other farming chores, crops to raise and harvest, the few cattle to care for, and the hog enterprise which had begun in earnest. It can easily be imagined that those few years were very busy ones, indeed. What is known for certain is that the market for pork and breeding stock began to decline, and at some point the bees were making more money than the hogs. It was then that Emil decided to abandon the hog enterprise and go into honey production full time. With that decision, improvement and expansion to the existing facilities became necessary. The hog barn was remodeled in about 1908 to include storage space and a shop and to serve as a place to extract honey (figures 6–7). Extracting equipment was purchased and installed and a couple of out-yards were established (figure 8).

Another important event took place on January 22, 1906: Emil married Clara Sterling from Elysian. They had two children: Gretchen and Charles. Charles would eventually take over the business.



figure 6. Hofmann Apiaries promotion photo showing the home yard with numerous hives, some of which were empty hive covers intended to inflate the actual size of the operation. The Hofmann's first car is parked in front of the converted hog barn. c. 1914

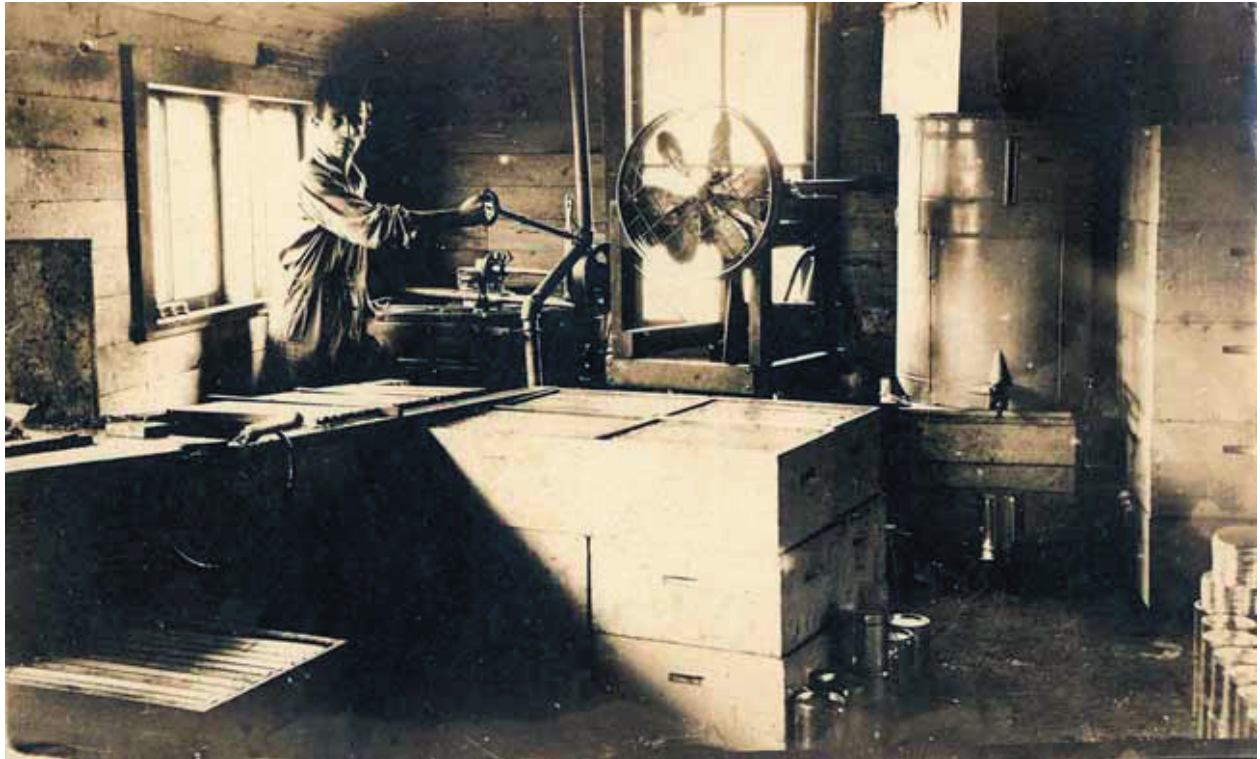


figure 7. Extracting in the converted hog barn.



figure 8. The "No 2" truck loaded with what is likely extracting equipment that would have been used at out-yards before the new honey house was built. In the early years all extracting was undertaken on-site regardless of a yard's location, and equipment had to be hauled to a yard. Initially the equipment was hauled on a hay wagon pulled by a team of horses.



## ALSIKE CLOVER

About this time Emil made a decision that affected agriculture practices in the region for the next 20 years: he decided to attempt growing alsike clover. He'd been reading about this crop, knew that it was being used successfully in the East for hay and pasture, but no one in the area had yet grown any. Among other advantages it would be a great source of nectar for the bees. Rosalia was somewhat skeptical as alsike clover is a perennial, and she was afraid it might take over the farm. However, Emil prevailed, ordered seed, sowed it with oats in the spring as directed, and waited to see how it might turn out. The outcome was all that he had hoped for. Once the oats were harvested the field turned green with clover, and the next year the clover produced a wonderful crop of seed. It is not known how the first crop or two were harvested, but neighboring farmers who saw what was happening on the Hofmann farm were eager to try the new crop. However, they were reluctant to do so without a means to harvest the seed, and here Emil saw an opportunity: he again extended himself to purchase a new clover huller and a secondhand steam engine to furnish power to the huller and transport it between jobs. He was now able to offer his services as a contract huller. Having a way to get their seed harvested gave local farmers reason to immediately begin growing alsike clover, and it became a huge success. From *American Bee Journal*, March, 1925: "In 1906 he interested a few farmers in growing alsike clover for seed, and since that time, under his leadership Janesville has grown to be one of the leading centers for alsike clover seed in the United States." At least in the initial years, Emil provided custom clover hulling for many farmers in the area (figures 9–10). From Charles Hofmann's autobiography:

"Alsike continued to be the prime crop grown by farmers for many miles around, and for a period of over twenty years it reigned as the best cash crop the area had ever seen. Other clover hullers eventually began appearing on the scene, and our mail carrier claimed that one beautiful day in clover hulling season he stopped his one-horse sulky on a high hill and counted twenty-two hullers at work. When alsike clover was in full bloom it was also quite a sight to see the fields. Many townspeople made it a point to drive through the countryside on warm sunny evenings to see the fields and enjoy the perfumed air.

A little before Alsike harvest began, seed company buyers took residence in the little hotel in Janesville and competed with each other to buy the seed. One time the editor of the local paper printed an article saying that, for quite a period of time in the fall, more freight cars left Janesville than from the city of Mankato because of the many carloads of alsike clover seed being shipped."



figures 9, 10. Emil's clover hulling equipment in operation.



## THE HOFMANN APIARIES 1906–1935

By all accounts Emil Hofmann was a bright, talented individual. He had an artistic bent, was good with his hands, studied, and was inventive, inquisitive and eager to find and try, or experiment with new methods and equipment to improve and grow his business. When he thought of a tool or piece of equipment that would make some bit of work easier but that did not yet exist, if possible he designed and built it. He was neat and extremely efficient. From *American Bee Journal*, August 1916: “Hofmann belongs to that rare class combining neatness with good practice and extensive production. His hives are nicely painted, stands are level, grass is cut, all equipment is in place, and everything is slick as the parlor of a Dutch housewife.”

He was also, unfortunately, a bit of a spendthrift and was inclined to at times spend money with extravagance, especially on his business. Whenever he became interested in something, it was his habit to devote whatever resources were necessary to fulfill the requirements of his interest. This meant that money that might have been saved or applied to debt often was not. However, this approach served him and The Hofmann Apiaries well for many years (figure 11).



figure 11. View of the south home yard showing a newly constructed bee cellar in which bees were kept during winter. The cellar is the light-colored structure between the honey house and the windmill. For many years all bees were kept in cellars during winter, and at one point there were four cellars: two at the home place and two in out-yards. Photo probably taken sometime between 1915 and 1920.

In about 1921 a large, concrete water reservoir was constructed to provide running water to both the house and the honey house. Improvements to the house were also undertaken that included a bathroom, an enclosed back porch, a small office, a wood and coal-burning furnace, and an enlarged basement. As the business grew, so did the requirements to handle this growth. Two or three hired hands lived and worked at the farm full-time, boarding in an upstairs “hired men’s room.”

The most significant improvement occurred in 1923 when a major addition was made to the old hog barn honey house. Not only was the original structure expanded and remodeled, but a large, three-story addition was added that included a steam-heated warming room, an extracting room with modern equipment, one floor dedicated to storage, and a hand-operated elevator that serviced all three floors. It had six 350-gallon tanks for extracted honey, making a total capacity of 2,100 gallons, or 25,200 pounds. Designed by Emil, it was a thoroughly modern and innovative building that drew attention both locally and nationally (figures 12–17 ).



figure 12. The new honey house, 1924.





figure 13. The new honey house viewed from the south



figure 14. The honey house with Emil standing in the garage door opening. This and the next photo appeared in the 1925 March and April issues of *American Bee Journal* in a two-part article about Emil, his modern facilities and efficient business practices.



figures 15, 16. Extracting in the new honey house, 1924.





figure 17. 1925.

In 1925 *American Bee Journal* published a two-part article about Emil and The Hofmann Apiaries that featured comprehensive coverage of the honey house. Among other things the article included photographs and floor plans for two of the levels. In 1928 they published another article that stated the following: "It seems impossible for me to describe the Hofmann extracting plant. It is one of the most extensive and perfectly arranged that I have ever seen among the hundreds of such plants visited. Any beekeeper who contemplates building a honey house for the output of two hundred or more colonies will find it money well spent to drive several hundred miles to see how this one is arranged." Clearly, Emil was an innovating pioneer in the practice and business of keeping bees, and though it is impossible to know for certain, at some point in these years The Hofmann Apiaries was almost certainly the largest producer of honey in Minnesota. One 1928 newspaper item described an upcoming meeting of beekeepers to be held at The Hofmann Apiaries. It detailed the speakers who included the editor of *American Bee Journal*, a former beekeeping specialist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, two University of Minnesota department heads, the state apiary inspector, and Emil. Of Emil the newspaper article stated: "E.L. Hofmann is one of the best, most successful and extensive beekeepers in the United States. His equipment is the best money can buy for efficient honey production. A visit to the home apiary of Mr. Hofmann alone will well repay anyone interested in honey production."

Things proceeded as intended until misfortune set in beginning with the stock market crash in 1929. Emil had joined a successful Idaho-based honey producer's co-op whose membership had spread to the Dakotas and Minnesota. Six weeks before the crash he had shipped 50,000 pounds of honey to a warehouse in Minneapolis, which was the local collection point for the area. Now, all was in turmoil. Along with everything else the market for honey plummeted and prices dropped precipitously. The co-op managers tried but couldn't find enough buyers for their honey. Warehouse and storage fees ate away at what remained of a dwindling profit. Then the dust bowl years of 1930–1934 set in. Honey and farm crops suffered severely. On December 30, 1930, in an effort to survive, Emil mortgaged everything he had with the Janesville State Bank, including the 50,000 pounds of honey at the Minneapolis warehouse. The Hofmanns managed to hang on for a time because during the next couple of years, despite the drought, the bees managed to find enough nectar to produce just enough honey to allow the family to survive.

The spring of 1933 was a repeat of 1931 and 1932: drought, wind and dust. Emil had been renting his land to a neighbor who wasn't doing a satisfactory job; he decided to again work the land himself and turned the responsibility of the bees over to his son, Charles. By this time mortgage payments were in default and likely had been for quite some time. Consequently, on July 17, 1933, the bank issued a foreclosure notice stating that all would be sold at auction at the end of the month. One can only speculate as to why, but no one showed up for the sale. At that point and with no other options, the bank simply declared ownership of everything. Emil was devastated. He had suffered bouts of depression in the past, and he now was experiencing the worst set-back imaginable. Everything he had worked for was lost. His only recourse was to throw himself into and at any kind of work he could find or invent. It seemed he was unable to relax, and only exhaustion would force him to rest. Family, relatives and friends pleaded with him to take care of himself but to no avail. After months of this, his normally good health weakened, he suffered a serious nervous and physical breakdown and was hospitalized. He developed pneumonia and severe jaundice and died on July 13, 1934, at age 59.

#### CHARLES AND ELLEN (HENDRICKS) HOFMANN

Charles was 26 and faced with a momentous decision: to take on the tremendous debt left by his father, or walk away and start a new life. It certainly would have been easier to turn his back on it all, and likely no one would have assigned blame. But in the end he chose to stay. He had his mother to consider, he felt a moral and ethical responsibility to repay his father's debts, and perhaps most significantly, he had come to love bees.

The mortgage on the land was owned by an insurance company, and a race began to find financing before the insurance company could take possession of the farm. Eventually, with the help of an uncle who was an experienced businessman, a Federal Land Bank loan was secured and the farm was saved. Further negotiations with the bank in Janesville for the bee business and farm chattel eventually resulted in a satisfactory



deal that added debt to the farm but saved the equipment with which to continue the operation. The total indebtedness amounted to a little over \$15,000.\*

Charles took on his new responsibilities with serious resolve and a vow never to go into debt if he could possibly avoid it. He had never had to deal directly with the finances of the farm, but he was determined to not repeat the financial mistakes of his father. To that end he set up a system of bookkeeping that at the end of each year balanced nearly to the penny. The markets had found their new levels and had stabilized, but profit margins were slim. It was two and a half years before Charles was able to finally pay the first 500 dollars against the debt. It was, as he put it, “. . . like trying to knock down a brick wall by tossing eggs at it.”

In 1941 Charles married Ellen Hendricks from Fulda, Minnesota. They had four children: Laurence (Larry), Ann, Gregory and Mary Lynn.

With Charles' hard work, frugal spending habits, attention to detail and an absolute mastery in the practice of keeping bees, The Hofmann Apiaries flourished and continued to be held in high regard with a far-reaching reputation for excellence both in product and practice. Though it took a good many years Charles eventually paid all his father's debts in full.

During his years operating The Hofmann Apiaries Charles consistently contributed to the beekeeping industry in a variety of ways: He was a skilled and prolific writer and wrote various articles for a number of beekeeping journals and magazines offering details of his practices and equipment; he belonged to various beekeeping organizations and served several terms as president and in many other official capacities of the Minnesota Beekeeper's Association; in 1942 he was instrumental in helping form the American Beekeeping Federation, and while serving as its vice-president in 1951, played a key role in helping the Federation's successful efforts to get restrictive World War Two price controls lifted on honey; he served three terms as chairman of the Haydak Research Fund; he served as State Apiary Inspector; he was an excellent photographer and contributed many close-up images of honey bees to bee journals and other publications, many of which were featured on covers; he made the photographs and created a slide lecture called "*The World of Bees*" that he presented to numerous groups and organizations, and to countless students,\*\* and for many years he judged the Bee and Honey Exhibit at the Minnesota State Fair. He continued keeping bees and producing honey until 1985 when, at age 77, unable to consistently secure enough needed and reliable help, he sold the business and retired. The new owner of the bees and equipment lived within a few miles of the farm, and at Charles' request, kept bees there for several years so that there were still bees on the farm throughout the 1990s.

In 2002 Charles and Ellen elected to put 15 acres of the farm in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. One five-acre plot was planted in deciduous trees, and another ten-acre section was planted in indigenous prairie grass and flowers. Those 15 acres, intended by Charles and Ellen to be part of the farm's legacy, will remain unchanged in perpetuity.

\* Fifteen thousand 1935 dollars would be equivalent to \$250,000 in 2012 dollars.

\*\* *The World of Bees* was introduced as a VHS video in 1998, was well received, and that year won a Telly Award described as “. . . one of the oldest competitions of its kind in the United States, giving recognition to outstanding film and video production, and non-network TV programing.” *The World of Bees* is being updated and will be released again as a DVD in 2013.

Ellen and Charles continued to live on the farm and both were active until their deaths: Ellen on October 23, 2004, and Charles on December 15, 2009.

## PRESENT DAY

In 2011 the four Hofmann children sold the arable portion of the land, 55 acres, to a close friend and neighbor, Bill Jewison, who had been renting the land since 2000. Before that, Bill's father, Bill Jewison Sr. and his brother Joe, had been farming the land on shares, a relationship that had begun in 1945. Since the Hofmann children weren't farmers, selling the land to Bill Jr. was a natural solution. Eldest son, Larry, and Jan, his wife, now own the remaining 45 acres and presently operate those acres as Hofmann Farm. Larry and Jan are determined to keep the farm, are both acutely aware and respectful of its history and heritage, and are now working to preserve as much of it as possible. The original frame house has been modernized over the years and has recently been extensively remodeled. Plans are in the works to begin offering the house as a place of retreat to singles, couples or small groups. People who have visited Hofmann Farm often express how they feel a sense of peace and serenity while there and comment on how lovely it is. Bees are once again being kept at Hofmann Farm by a beekeeper who is also interested in seeing the farm and its history upheld. There is hope that the honey house and "wax shed," a 20 × 40 foot building erected in 1926 for the purpose of rendering wax, might be preserved for their historical value. With the enthusiastic help and encouragement of the Waseca County Historical Society, on January 19, 2016, The Hofmann Apiaries was entered into the National Register of Historic Places. The Hofmann Apiaries is one of only three honey bee-related sites on the Register and the only one who will be able to offer living history, education, and services to small and novice beekeepers and others who are interested.

## HOFMANN CENTER FOR HONEY BEES

People the world over are becoming increasingly aware of the peril honey bees face. Their peril is also ours, as the honey bee and man's food supplies are inextricably linked. The owners of Hofmann Farm are clearly aware of this, and there is fervent hope that in some way the farm might be used to further inform, educate and instruct people in the ways of bees, their importance to us, and how best to begin reversing trends and practices that are endangering bees and our own well-being. The approach is multi-faceted with the emphasis on education and service. The name currently favored for this enterprise is the Hofmann Center for Honey Bees (HCHB). The first priority is to restore the honey house and refit it to become a fully functioning extracting plant. HCHB will then offer extracting as a service to any beekeeper wishing to take advantage of the facility. Fortunately, there is an increasing interest in beekeeping, and the number of hobbyist beekeepers is growing rapidly. However, extracting honey, especially for one having only a handful of colonies is an expensive and somewhat cumbersome proposition. It is hoped that people who are interested in keeping some bees but are hesitant to take the plunge because of extracting, might be encouraged to start keeping bees knowing they have a way to harvest their honey



without the bother or expense of doing it themselves. (This not unlike Emil Hofmann providing clover hulling to local farmers as a way of encouraging them to grow alsike clover.) The second priority is to restore and update the wax shed with an open and modern interior space. The wax shed will then function as a place to hold seminars, workshops and classes and will also serve as a place to install museum-quality displays of historic tools and equipment used in beekeeping and in the production of honey. These displays will be augmented with large photographs and graphic displays documenting the historic aspect of The Hofmann Apiaries and of beekeeping in general. Much of the extracting equipment Charles Hofmann sold in 1985 has recently been located (one extractor had changed hands three times before it was found), and plans include returning some of that equipment to the honey house to serve as part the functioning extracting plant or to the museum area of the wax shed as non functioning historic displays.

It is thought that this historic site with its unique and wonderful old honey house, in conjunction with the wax shed, is the perfect place where people and students can visit to learn about honey bees, how honey is processed, and most importantly, to learn how significant honey bees are to humans and the environment



(continue below)

# The honey house today

