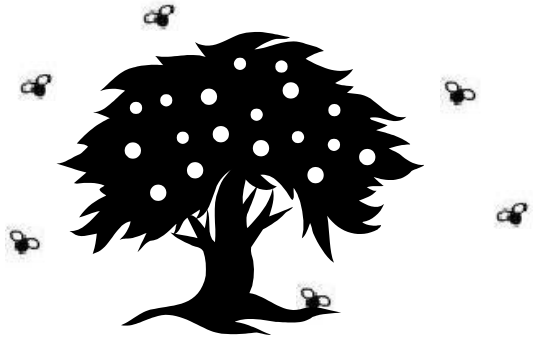
# Don't Give Up On Your Dreams

## A Memoir of Larry, Tree-Apple-Bee Man



Written by Kathy Vaillancourt

A featured book in the *Million Decisions* series

"Storytelling is the most powerful way to put *ideas into the world today."*

-Robert McKee

The books in the *Million Decisions* series highlight people who have at least one characteristic in common—they set a direction for their lives and then persevere in the journey, making a million tough decisions to move toward their goal. Should I sleep longer this morning or go to work? Do I paint the living room wall to cover the scratch or go to work? Do I find other excuses for not getting to work, like listening to the radio, watching TV, taking a nap, surfing the web, texting acquaintances, dreaming of easier work, more money, a bigger house, a faster car, and so on? To be human is to make a variety of decisions each and every day. But the people in *A Million Decisions* have made at least 30 years of hard decisions in pursuit of unusual and praiseworthy goals, and in the process they have created lives that teach and inspire.

By the numbers…

30 – The average number of years each adult devotes to the realization of a lifelong goal.

100 – The tough decisions made each day to pursue the goal.

10,950 – The days in 30 years.

1,095,000 – The tough decisions made over 30 years to pursue the goal.

# *Don't Give Up on Your Dreams*

## *A Memoir of Larry, Tree-Apple-Bee Man*

by Kathy Vaillancourt

# *Don't Give Up on Your Dreams*

## *A Memoir of Larry, Tree-Apple-Bee Man*

by Kathy Vaillancourt



Published by Dan and Kathy Vaillancourt
dvailla@luc.edu
www.memoirforchange.org

Cover Design by Kathy Vaillancourt

# Preface

*"I was a tree nut from day one.*
*Then the bees buzzed and turned my head.*
*Why, I think they're both in my blood."*

Larry requested that some identifiers (including his last name) be omitted so that he can remain anonymous. Therefore, I cannot introduce to the readers the person behind the story. I can tell you, however, that at the age of 69, Larry is still in love with nature, and he is still pursuing his dreams.

Kathy Vaillancourt
September 27, 2010

# *I.* 

## *Tree Roots*

"You were a tree nut from day one," Pa once told me. "Whenever your Ma and I took you out in the baby carriage, we'd have to stop at every tree on the street so you could touch them."

I don't remember as far back as my baby carriage days, but I think I was three or so when I started pestering my folks to find out everything they knew about trees. Pa answered most of my questions when we went for long walks on weekends. We lived on the banks of the Rock River in Illinois, and we'd head upriver until we reached a 200-acre county park. Why, we'd spend whole afternoons tramping through the woods, and Pa would name all the trees. "That's an elm over there, Larry, and…well, I'll be… look at that big sycamore next to it! They're not usually found this far north. A real beauty, isn't it? Oh, that one there is a hickory, and the one next to it is a white oak." Then he'd show me the different kinds of bark and leaves on each of them, so that I could start naming the individual trees myself.

One day we came across a burr oak tree stump. Pa knelt next to it. "Know how old this tree was, Larry?"

Before I could answer, he took my right hand and pulled me down next to him. "See all those rings? Each one equals a year's growth for the tree."

"How come some of the rings are thicker than others, Pa?"

"Rain, plain and simple. The thick rings tell you there was a good amount of rain those years, and the thinner ones mean dry years."

I sat down next to the stump and counted the rings. Thirty-two. Twenty thick ones and twelve thin ones. Wet wins over dry. Interesting stuff. Then I stood up on the stump and looked at all the trees around me. "Pa, one day I'm going to get some land and make my own tree park. And I'll plant plenty of apple trees so Ma never runs out of applesauce or apple pies."

Pa smiled. "No reason why you can't."

When Pa and I weren't out walking among the trees, we were sitting at the kitchen table eating up all the interesting information in the tree books we got at the library. Why, between Pa, the county park, and books, I was getting the best tree education a boy could ask for. But I liked learning the best from Pa. Why, he knew a little bit about a lot of things because he had always been an adventure man, never afraid to try something new. He started out as a schoolteacher to support the family, but after three and a half

years he gravitated toward engineering. He had always been a good mechanic, loved anything mechanical. He was also a plant man, always reading about one new plant or another. When I was ten years old, Pa had gotten a subscription to *Reader's Digest*, and one day he was reading about a forty-niner who went to the gold fields in California and didn't find anything. So, this unsuccessful prospector got on his horse after loading his saddlebags with sequoia seeds and moved to Oregon to settle down there. According to the article, the man planted those seeds and produced trees five feet in diameter. The story interested Pa to the extent that he rode around until he finally found a place to buy a packet of sequoia seeds.

Our house was already filled with pots sprouting all sorts of things. Ma was into flowers and vegetables, so there were gladiolas, hibiscus, tomatoes, peppers, green beans, and other such plants scattered around the living room. Why, she even tried planting peanuts one time. And Pa was into orchids, too. It was fun watching all those plants grow, but it was pure exhilaration when Pa planted the sequoia seeds, about a dozen of them. Before he planted the first seed, he held one up, no smaller than a grain of rice. "Hard to believe a seed this small can produce a giant tree." Then he planted the seeds in the potted soil, and placed the pots around the living room and kitchen.

I watched him water and fuss over the sequoia plantings every day. I was interested, but I just wasn't sure what to do

with the interest I felt. And so I watched. When the seeds started sprouting and growing a bit, I imagined that our house would turn into a miniature forest. One day I showed Pa the seedling on the side of the kitchen sink. It was no more than a quarter of an inch tall. "This one's going to be the biggest, Pa. It's taller than the other ones." That night I dreamt about having a yard full of sequoias as wide as my house and as tall as the sky that I could show off to my friends.

Pa tried two or three times to plant the sequoia seedlings out in the back yard, but they all died. He found out later from a tree book that sequoias didn't grow in our area. Why, we'd have to live in a place like California or Oregon to have any success. But Pa didn't get discouraged. The whole thing was an adventure to him, and he figured he had learned something new.

Two years later, when I was 12 years old, I started collecting local tree seeds, and I built myself a two by three tree nursery in the back yard. One day I was raking and hoeing the area, when Pa came home from work.

"Planting some vegetables?"

"Trees, Pa. I'm making my own nursery." I put down the hoe, and picked up the rake. "I guess if I ever want to have my own tree park, I'll need some experience."

"Any special kind of trees?"

I leaned the rake against my body, reached into my back jeans pocket, and pulled out packets of red cedar, red pine, Norway spruce, and red delicious apple.

Pa looked at the seeds. "Interesting." Then he picked up the hoe and started moving the dirt with me. "Sure you don't want to start them in the house? Lots of rabbits out here, you know."

"I bought some hardware cloth. You know, kind of a mesh that's been dipped in zinc. Supposed to last forever, they say."

"I guess you did your homework." Pa stopped hoeing for a minute and patted me on the back. "It'll be fun to watch them grow."

It was fun, but hard work, too. Pa helped me set up the mesh to keep out the rabbits, and I woke up many times during the first nights to check and make sure the rabbits didn't somehow get through a corner of the mesh. I checked and double-checked the mesh every day, watering and fussing over the seeds just like Pa did over the sequoias. One night, the closing of the kitchen door woke up Pa when I was going outside to check on the mesh. I was leaning down, checking the corners of the nursery, when he called from the back porch.

"Everything alright?"

"Just checking on the rabbits, Pa." Then I went inside the house, and we sat at the kitchen table to have a glass of milk and a piece of Ma's apple pie.

"I can help you with the weeding this morning, if you'd like," he said.

"Sure, Pa."

Pa and I continued our walks upriver to check the trees along the bank and at the county park. We often worked together on my tree nursery, and my dreams of having my own tree park were getting stronger. But when I started high school, I got my head turned by the bees.

## *II.*

## ***Bee-ginnings***

High School never interested me much. There were too many exciting things happening outside the classroom walls. Bees, for example. I remember daydreaming in algebra class my junior year of high school and calculating the honey production of bees. I'd watch the smallest hand on the big black round clock on the wall tick away the seconds, thinking to myself, "Gee, if every one of those seconds was a pound of honey and each hour was a beehive, why, I'd have 3,600 pounds of honey per hour." Then I'd figure how many pounds of honey I'd have by noon. That was the kind of math that interested me. The pounds changed daily, depending on the time I started counting, but the numbers always matched the size of my bee dreams…BIG. When the noon bell rang, I'd run home along the banks of the Rock River, eager to check the beehives Pa and I had built in the back yard.

Before the bees moved to the yard, they set up house in the walls of our kitchen. It was an old house, so old it had square nails, not well built, you know. I can still hear those bees buzzing like hundreds of tiny chain saws as they squeezed their fat bodies through the cracks in the outside walls.

Pa bought the house back in 1940, the year before I was born. He actually bought three lots along with the house. "Need to have enough room for your gardens," he told Ma. The land had River Street in the front and the Rock River in the back. I often wondered how many miles the bees traveled downstream before they found the poorest built house to settle in.

For the most part, we didn't pay much attention to the bees, because their flight path was away from the back door. But, an unusual event demanded our attention on June 15, 1957. I was 16 at the time, and had just come in for lunch after doing yard chores. Ma was standing at the kitchen sink washing strawberries and peering out the window.

"Whatcha lookin' at, Ma?"

"Not sure."

On my way to the bathroom to wash my hands, I stopped at the stove and smelled the two apple pies Ma had just taken out of the oven, and I gave a quick stir to the pot of vegetable stew simmering on the front burner. A bowl of fresh cream was sitting on the sideboard, and I was tempted to dip my finger in it. You know, if Ma's kitchen wasn't heaven, then I don't know what was. Nobody could cook or garden like Ma. Her strawberry crops were such that she picked them by the gallon and canned so many that all year round we ate strawberry shortcake, strawberry bread, strawberry pie,

strawberry tarts, and strawberry jam. Once when old Doc Peters stopped by to check on an earache I had, why, I half expected him to pull a strawberry or two out of my ears. Ma had a magic touch with vegetables, too. Why, she could whip up the finest pot of stew from the smallest pickings. She'd find some corn nubbins with 20 or 30 kernels on them, a few green tomatoes, some leftover potatoes and what all, and she'd produce the tastiest vegetable stew a man has ever eaten. And could she make applesauce and apple pies! Sometimes she'd have me ride my bike up by the county park to pick dropped apples from a big old Duchess apple tree. She'd wash them, trim them up, and add a cup or two of cinnamon sugar. That sauce and pie were a taste of pure paradise.

Ma was still at the window when I came back from the bathroom. "I think there's a swarm in the old oak tree," she said.

"Swarm? You mean, bees?"

She nodded her head, never taking her eyes from the tree.

I pushed open the screen door and ran to the large hollow oak next to the riverbank. And, sure enough, about eight feet up there was a black football-shaped mass sitting on a large tree limb. Didn't even look like bees. Just a big bunch of black dots bunched together.

Soon after, Pa came home from town, and the two of us just stood and stared at the swarm until Ma called us to lunch.

Pa buzzed the whole lunch hour about the swarm in the oak. Why, he was so excited he talked, chewed, and swallowed almost at the same time. "I know this guy who lives between Rockton and Beloit. Jake something or other. Late 70s, retired, I think. Beekeeper by trade. Maybe he can hive it for us."

Near the end of lunch, Pa turned to me and said, "So, Larry, what do you think? Do you want to keep some bees?"

I hadn't really much thought about it, and so I got up from my chair and walked to the kitchen window. The black swarm was still there, and I felt something stir inside me. Interest, I guess. "Sure, Pa. Bees sound pretty neat."

That night, Pa called the old beekeeper. He expected Jake would ask a lot of questions, but all he said was, "Tommor'a afta'noon. Three a'clock sharp. "

The next afternoon, an old rusty Ford station wagon drove into our driveway. Out of it stepped old Jake, barely five feet tall, beanpole thin, bent like a crooked finger, hands and face wrinkled like prunes. But, oh, he was quick as a cat with a dog on its tail when he climbed up the wooden extension ladder to gather the swarm of bees to hive it. I expected him to be wearing some sort of protective covering, but the only

gear he had on was a pair of leather garden gloves and a wide-brimmed tan hat with a mesh net dropping to cover his face. He also brought a few other items, a cardboard box with a cover, a square wooden box with a metal-sheathed top ("That's the hive," Pa whispered to me), and a large cloth flour sack. What surprised me the most was that Jake talked to the bees.

"Gall darn, what a bunch of beauties. Don't fret now. Old Jake here will take care of ye." He stood on the top rung of the ladder, pulled a pocketknife from his belt, and cut off some small branches below the limb where the swarm was settled. The bees stirred a bit from Jake's movements, and a few inched closer to his head.

"Watch out you don't get stung," I called up to him.

Jake smiled down at me as he dropped one of the small branches to the ground. "Nothin' to fret about. They all been chowin' down honey. Too fat and lazy to think about stingin'."

I flinched when Jake moved his head and hands closer to the swarm. But what happened next was pure exhilaration.

Jake called down for someone to get the cardboard box and cover and to hold the box directly underneath the swarm.

Pa said to me, "Go ahead, Larry."

I was too excited to be scared, and so I grabbed Pa's six-foot stepladder from the side of the house, put it under the tree, picked up the cardboard box and cover, and climbed up to the swarm.

"Get the box right under 'em," Jake said. "As close as ye can. Ye hold on tight now. These fat beauties are honey heavy."

I put the box cover on the top of the stepladder, gripped the box tightly, and held it under the swarm.

"Hold on tight," he said again. "Don't let go a that box."

He shook the limb, and the swarm fell into the box like a big gooey lump of caramel popcorn left out in the sun. Only a few bees didn't make it into the box, so Jake pushed them gently with his glove. Then he leaned towards me, took the box cover from the top of the stepladder, put it on top of the box, and came down his ladder.

Why, Jake was right. The box felt like there were ten pounds of honey in it. I broke out in a sweat trying to keep hold of the box as I climbed down the stepladder. When my feet touched the ground, I handed the box to Jake.

"Care…ful. Care…ful," he whispered. "Don't wanta wake the sleepin' beauties."

He set the cardboard box next to the wooden beehive, picked up the flour sack and laid it out in front of the hive. Then he told me to take the cover off the cardboard box and dump the bees on the sack.

"Do it easy-like," he said.

I dropped the bees slowly onto the sack and watched them squirm around a bit. Then, as if they were a bunch of soldiers obeying a command to march to their barracks, the bees paraded one by one into the hive.

Jake said, "That's what I like. Full co-operation."

I just stood there looking at the hive, not quite comprehending what had just happened.

"Fine job," Pa said as he shook Jake's hand and handed him some money. Not sure how much. Then we all shook hands, and Pa and I walked Jake to his truck. When the old Ford backed out of our driveway, Jake rolled down his window and hollered out: "Hope ye have sweet luck with them beauties." And when his truck hit the street, he sang out, "A swarm in May is worth a load of hay. A swarm in June is worth a silver spoon. A swarm in July is worth a fly."

And that was my first lesson in beekeeping.

# *III.*

## *A Home for My Bees and Trees*

When I graduated from high school, I had about 50 beehives, and I was still taking care of my back yard nursery. Three of the red cedars I had planted four years earlier were growing well, but I was putting in a lot of hard work to try and save the struggling red pines, Norway spruces, and red delicious apple trees. And I tried to fit college in with the bee and tree work, but that didn't work out. Bees and trees were on my mind from morning til night. I was doing a different kind of schooling. I was learning how to keep a nursery by working with Pa and reading tree books, and I was learning the bee trade from the sharpest beekeeper in the area, Ivan "Bee" Whiting. Why, Ivan had been in the business for 50-plus years, and any man or woman who wanted to know anything about bees came to him with questions. That's the kind of reputation he had. And he was about the nicest man I ever met, besides Pa, that is. When Uncle Sam called me to the army for two years, Ivan took care of my bees as a favor to me. And when I came home, I found out that he had built my hives up to 100.

A few days after I came back from the army, Pa asked, "You still planning on getting some land? Or will you work in town for awhile?"

Even as a young kid I knew that I didn't want to work for somebody else. I wanted my own business, do my own things, and make my own mistakes. During my army stint in Mannheim, Germany, all I could think about was buying some land to start up my own bee business and plant a home orchard and maybe a small nursery.

Pa put his hand on my shoulder. "Well?"

Ma was sitting on the couch mending the holes in my army socks. She looked up and smiled, waiting for my answer. I remember thinking how lucky I was to have her and Pa as my folks. Why, they never pushed me to do anything I wasn't interested in, but when I tried new ventures they were always there to help me. On a scale of one to ten, ten being the best, my folks were a twenty.

"I want to buy some land, Pa. I want to raise bees and get started on a home orchard."

It was a Saturday morning, late November of 1965. Pa liked to go for drives around the countryside on weekends, and so he suggested we all take a spin "just to look around." The three of us jumped into Pa's six-year-old Chevy Impala and drove north over the Illinois border into Wisconsin.

We headed west when we hit Wisconsin, and we didn't stop until we reached a little town called Blanchardville, 50 miles east of Dubuque, Iowa and 80 miles from home. We tracked

down a land agent on Main Street, Tony something or other, and he took us out to look at forty acres set on a hill. When we reached the top of the hill, I saw miles and miles of rolling farmland and trees, and a sky so low I felt I could almost reach up and touch it. "Quite a view up here," I said. "I bet if I looked hard enough, I could see Lake Michigan."

The land agent said, "You know, this used to be an old military radar site back in the 1950s. For a few years or so, I think. I guess they figured it was a good place to be on the lookout for Russian planes or somethin'." Then he asked me if I wanted to see the house that went with the land. "It's across the road."

But I wasn't interested. I'd be spending most of my time outdoors tending to the beehives and the orchard. As long as I had a place to put a bed, that was fine with me. I looked over the land again, and started thinking about the best place to put a little house to store my beekeeping equipment and to extract honey. And where would I put the hives, plant the orchard, and maybe experiment with sequoias and other trees? Why, there would be so much to do…

"Owner was askin' $7,000 a month ago," the land agent said to Pa. "But, he's lowered it to $6,000."

Pa turned to me. "What do you think? Like the place?"

"Well, it's pretty neat, but I don't have $6,000."

Then Pa said something that astonished me. "Let's say Ma and I buy it, and you pay us back when you can." Pa had always told me not to have business dealings with relatives. I guess he was making an exception for me.

Pa signed the papers on my 25th birthday, January 3, 1966. "Well, Larry, it's the real thing now."

The land agent added, "You know, beein' and treein' are about the most unpredictable things you could get into. As unpredictable as the weather."

Ivan had already warned me about the fickle nature of beekeeping. His favorite story was about the year one beekeeper extracted 200 pounds from each of his hives, while a fellow just 30 miles east of him extracted only five pounds per hive. "Can't be explained," said Ivan. "But I'd say one fellow was pretty darned lucky and the other was not."

Pa had always told me that there was no such thing as predictability. "That's kind of what makes life interesting. Makes a person want to get up in the morning."

I kept bees for almost 25 years, and I've had apples for nearly 40. And it's been unpredictability that's kept me excited most days.

# *IV.*

## *Bee-ing and Tree-ing*

The first three years on the farm were fairly predictable, probably because I was mostly setting up shop. I stayed with the folks the first three winters so that I could keep working with Ivan to learn more tricks of the bee trade. When the weather warmed up, I'd move back to the farm to do my beekeeping and apple orchard work. It sure was nice to have the folks come up some weekends to help out.

The land was just about treeless back in 1966, so there was plenty of room to plant a home orchard. The folks and I worked side by side planting the trees, just 10 or 11, more than enough to keep Ma's applesauce jars and pie pans filled. Pa and I dug the holes, and Ma held the trees straight while we pushed the dirt back in. Then we all took turns watering them. We didn't talk much while we worked, but we sure smiled a lot and let out a considerable amount of sighs of pure satisfaction.

Once the trees were planted, the three of us placed the beehives around the 40 acres. I had over a hundred hives, so it took a bunch of weekends to get the job done. We had to make sure the hives were placed where high winds couldn't knock them over or heavy snows wouldn't bury them. I remember how exhilarating it was walking around with the folks and deciding on the best spots. I can still hear Ma's

voice calling from under some oak trees. "I found a few good places over here, Larry," and Pa's voice yelling from the opposite direction, "Got a nice spot over here." I could hardly keep up with the two of them.

There was a lot to do taking care of the bees and the home orchard, and I really had no business adding more work when I could hardly finish the jobs I already had. But, a year after we planted the home orchard, I came across an article in a tree nursery catalogue that made commercial apple growing seem like the easiest way to get rich. That sounded real interesting to me, doing something I loved and making some money, too. Oh, I didn't believe that there was any such thing as a sure and easy way to get rich. And I understood enough about the apple growing business to know that it was labor intensive and that anything from the weather to insects, animals, and disease could destroy a season's crop. Why, I almost lost the first trees the folks and I planted when deer got to them, and I had to spend money I didn't really have to buy electric fencing to keep them out. The only thing I could count on was the exhilaration I felt when I planted a young apple tree and watched it grow and bloom. Pure magic.

I knew it would take awhile to know if I had a chance to make even a fair income on growing apples, but I sure was excited about building up the orchard. And I was excited about all the honey I'd be extracting from my hives, too. Why, I even had big dreams of selling honey and apples

from a big sales building I'd construct on the hill at the old radar site. I imagined a large room with plenty of space for the apples and honey, a little corner with a table, a few chairs, a pot of hot coffee, and some free apple samples. I wanted my customers to feel at home.

The winter of 1968, I ordered more apple trees, and when spring of 1969 came, my folks helped me put in 70 more, and a year later 110, my largest planting. I was going to the library regularly during this time, reading up on fruit orchards and such. There was no Ivan around to teach me about apples. One night I called Pa to tell him about *Modern Fruit Science* by Dr. Norman Childers. "It's the bible of fruit growers, Pa. Real interesting. I stayed up half the night reading it, and bought myself a copy today." Pa and I read that book so many times that we had to patch it up with scotch tape twice a year.

At the same time the trees were growing, the bees were buzzing and busy producing honey. I worried that I would never have enough honey for selling, but then one spring morning in 1969 I woke up about the same time as the bees stirred from their winter rest and said to myself, "This is it. I'm ready to start for real." And that's when old unpredictability set in. Why, I started out extracting anywhere from 30 to 60 pounds of honey per hive, and then a year came along that a whole bunch of the hives produced only three pounds each. I'm still scratching my head over that one. And the bees were fickle, too. Some days they

were as sweet as could be, so I'd be more careless about putting on my bee equipment. Then a few days later, they'd be ornery and sting me every which way. When I complained to Pa about the bee stings, he'd laugh. "They're just reminding you that they're the boss." I was frustrated when these things happened, but I didn't feel real discouragement until the winter the mouse-proofing I put on the hives didn't work on thirty of them. Total destruction. I phoned Pa when I discovered the disaster, and he said, "Larry, don't worry. All of them weren't destroyed. Remember, there's always next year. Next year will be better."

Pa was right. A real disaster would have been losing all the hives. And, besides, sometimes there were things that happened that outweighed all the bad times. Why, there was 1973 when the price of honey tripled, from 14 cents a pound to 40-plus cents. Seems like there was a big demand for organic food and honey back then, not just here but all around the world. It was a record year for me. Why, I extracted 80,000 pounds of honey from about 600 hives. A lot of beekeepers took their fat checks and bought new automobiles and some fancy beekeeping gadgets. I thought about a new car, and I could have used a new gadget or two, but I followed Pa's advice about unpredictability. The first thing I did was to pay my folks the $6,000 they had loaned me for the farm. I put the rest in the bank. Good thing I did, because the honey prices went downhill pretty quickly after the big bonanza.

Honey prices settled around 20 cents a pound for awhile, and I couldn't complain. I was making a modest living. And even when I had tough times with the business, when I wasn't quite sure how I'd pay the bills, I still considered myself the luckiest man in the world. I had the best folks in the world, my own farm, and the good fortune to work out in nature every day. Why, I hardly stepped inside the house some days. And it showed. The old house had the typical bachelor stamp on it. Unmade bed. Dirty dishes piled on the sink and table. Dust an inch deep. That sort of stuff. Oh, I'd clean up when I had to, but being outside with the bees and trees was more important to me.

Then in 1974, the apple business was getting pretty exciting. Why, it was time to harvest from the first trees we planted, and I was getting real hepped up about selling them at the Farmer's Market in Madison, Wisconsin. I heard that the market was held every Saturday morning on the Capitol Square during the harvest season. "Customers come by the hundreds," someone told me. "All you have to do is get there early, set up a table with your produce, and the customers come marching in."

Early for me was seven in the morning. I was no farmer. Rolling out of bed at four or five in the morning was not my style. I figured if I got ready the night before the market and packed a breakfast to eat during the one-hour drive, I'd be up and selling by 8:15 or so. That seemed early enough to me.

The eve of my first farmer's market was a Friday in late September 1974, and I worked late into the evening, sorting through the four bushels I picked, mostly Paula Reds. I put aside any blemished apples and polished up the rest. I took care with each apple so that customers would feel that every piece of fruit was picked special for them. And I marked each bag of apples at a fair price, too. Oh, I was advised by some folks to jack up my prices, since locally grown produce was considered a specialty item. But I preferred to follow Pa's advice. "Both the buyer and the seller should get a good deal. And if you're the seller, always make sure your customer gets the better deal."

I went to bed around 11:00, and the excitement of selling my first apple harvest kept me awake most of the night. At 7:05 the next morning, I took out the back seat of my Ford Pinto so I would have plenty of room for the four bushels of apples and a card table. Then I hit the road and arrived on the square around 8:10. Plenty early, I thought. But the square was already buzzing with swarms of sellers and customers. One of the other sellers later told me that "early" meant 6:00 A.M. The market opened at 6:30 A.M. Why, folks who lived two and three hours away had to get up at two or three in the morning. By the time I parked my Pinto a few blocks away and brought my card table to mark my selling spot, it was 8:30. Then I hurried back to the Pinto to start bringing my apples. When I got back with the first bushel, a short man with red hair and a red beard was standing at my spot. "That your table, buddy? Gotta move it. This is my spot."

He said it very matter-of-factly, waving his hands in the air as if shooing away a fly. I just stared at him, trying to figure out why he would take the spot when he knew it was mine. He must have thought I hadn't heard him because he raised his voice. "Gotta move the table! Find another place!" Why, his face got as red as his hair, and his hands were clenched so tight his knuckles were white. I kind of felt sorry for him. It looked like he wanted to fight over something as silly as who got where first. This kind of monkey doodling around wasn't my style, and so I dragged my table and apples to another place.

I stopped going to the Farmer's Market after a month. The apples sold well and I met a lot of real nice sellers there, no one like the red-headed bully. But it seemed hardly worth the hassle to do all that traveling and set-up when I was only a one-man operation. I needed every available minute to take care of the bees and the orchard. When I told my folks about my decision, Pa said, "If one thing doesn't work out, you can always try another." Then we tossed around a few ideas, and we all agreed it was worth me trying my own farmer's market at the top of the driveway by the house, kind of a self-service market. That way, folks could come by anytime to buy apples and honey, and I didn't have to be there. I got started with a sheet of plywood on a few cement blocks, and then I built an eight-by-ten foot shed on skids. I put a few shelves on the walls, put in a few windows and a door, and set an empty coffee can on a shelf below the south window. Why, all folks had to do was open the coffee can lid and

drop in their money for the apples and honey they bought. A real simple operation. I sold out of that shed for 20 years, and I made a pretty fair income from that coffee can cash register. And as far as I know, nobody ever tinkered with the money.

## *V.*

♥ ♥

## *Letting Go and Holding On*

During the two decades I ran the roadside stand, my dream of building a large sales building got stronger as my apple harvests and honey production increased. Why, I'd stay up late many nights drawing plans for the inside of the building and puzzling over where the building should be. All I needed to put the dream into reality was money. I saved what I could, but there was always some sort of emergency that came up and I'd have to dip into my savings. The folks and I had a grand time reviewing my plans every year and deciding on the best location for the building.

"How close to the road you figure you want to be?" Pa would say.

"Twenty yards or thereabouts," I'd say. "Right about here." Then I'd take his hand and point to the exact spot.

In 1986, the bee and apple businesses were going fairly well. Why, I even thought that one day I'd be an old beekeeping veteran, just like Ivan. I know I made a few mistakes along the way, like making more hives and planting more trees than one man can handle. Oh, the work always got done but not always on time. It helped to have the folks working with me when they could, and I guess I could have hired a part-

timer or two. But, I figured if I did that, we'd get to gassing too much, and the work wouldn't get done anyway. When I told Pa about this, he said, "Well, think about it, Larry. You might want to try one part-timer and see how it goes." Before I had a chance to think about it, unpredictability hit hard.

It was a hot and humid July day in 1986. Pa and I were walking to a stand of oak trees to check on some hives, and I noticed that he was walking slower than usual. I stayed in step with him, and when I turned to look at him, I saw that his skin was yellowish. I passed the water thermos to him. "You okay, Pa?"

"Sure. Just a little tired." He opened the thermos and took a few swallows of water. Then he looked around the pasture, took a deep breath, and put his hand on my shoulder. "Don't give up on your dreams, Larry. Your bees and trees are going good, and you'll have enough money one of these days to build your sales building." Then his voice lowered to a whisper. "Your Ma and I are sure looking forward to helping you build it."

Two weeks later, Ma phoned me. "Can you come home for the weekend, Larry? Your Pa's real sick."

"The flu, Ma?"

"No, his liver. That's why his skin is yellow." Ma choked up for a minute. "They think it's cancer."

And it was.

We buried Pa four months later.

I don't remember much about those four months. I guess I tried to keep myself real busy so I wouldn't think about life without Pa. But I do remember sitting with him a few nights before he died and holding his hand.

Right before he fell asleep, he squeezed my hand. "Larry, don't let go of what makes you happy. No matter what."

After Pa died, Ma moved to the same town in Wisconsin where some of her brothers and sisters lived, about 25 miles from the farm. She came up to the farm often, and she'd go out in the orchard with me and pick apples to make her applesauce and pies for the year. I can't explain how empty the orchard seemed without Pa there beside us. Ma and I didn't talk much about him not being there. I guess we just dealt with him being gone by keeping ourselves busy.

I've often wondered what Pa would have said in 1988, just two years after he died, when I noticed the bees were acting funny, kind of moving slowly and dying off more quickly. I did some investigating and found out that there was some sort of bee mite attacking hives all over the country. Seems

that these microscopic parasites were first detected at a commercial beekeeping company in Weslaco, Texas in 1984. They attacked a bee's tracheal system, and pretty much killed the bee. Within a year, the mites had reached seventeen or so states, and by 1988 they found their way to my bee farm.

I tried a pesticide that was supposed to help, but that didn't work. I guess by the time I realized what was going on, it was too late to do anything about it. I felt helpless and discouraged as I watched my 600 hives go to nothing over three years time.

By 1991, I was down to my last beehive. Ma came to visit one day in early summer, and I remember her standing next to me in the honey house and asking, "Sure you don't want to start over?" And I knew from the way she was looking at me, her brown eyes staring straight into mine, that this was what Pa would have wanted, to help me start over with the bees.

I put my arm around Ma. "I'm sure." Then I explained to her that it would cost too much to start over. My old equipment was pretty much used up, and the new gadgets would be expensive. "But, don't worry, I still have the orchard."

I was so down in the dumps about the bees that I didn't notice that Ma's skin was turning the same yellow Pa's had when he was sick.

A few weeks later, Ma phoned and said, "It looks like I caught the same liver cancer your Pa had. But I think I'll be okay. There's a new treatment out that should help."

But it didn't.

I buried Ma four months later.

When Ma was dying and I was traveling almost daily between the farm and her house, she worried that I might give up on my idea of a new sales building. Why, she'd be lying in her bed, too weak to eat or sit up, and she'd be fussing over me. "Larry, remember what Pa always told you," she'd say. "Don't give up on your dreams."

A month after Ma died, I was standing on the hill at the spot Pa and I had last marked for the sales building. In my left hand was a sheet of paper with the building plans, and in my right hand was an inheritance check that Ma had left for me, a little more than enough to start buying lumber and other supplies for the building. I always thought that my folks had just enough money to live a fairly comfortable life and that when they were gone the money was gone, too. And that was fine with me. That's the way it should be.

I dug my feet into the dirt on the sales building spot, and I knew my folks would be there with me as I poured every drop of cement, nailed in every piece of lumber, and put up

every piece of roofing. Why, on a scale of one to ten, my folks would always be a twenty.