

TELLING THE BEES

**Stay home pretty bees,
And work your goodness to man.
Your good master has died and gone,
A new master will come before you.**

**Serve your queen and your new master good bees.
Blessed is the bounty for which God has created you.**

**Bring forth the flowers and fruits
And blessed is the honey you bring for all.**

The custom of “*Telling the Bees*” when a beekeeper has died.

Fellow beekeepers or family members are to visit the apiary of the beekeeper after he or she has died and speak to the bees of the death of their owner. If the bees were not asked to stay with their new master or mistress, it was believed that they would die or abscond.

This article was researched and edited by Virginia Webb, 2009

Think about all the activities around the death of a person in olden times and you can see how the hives might be neglected for a period contributing to the death or absconding of the bees. If not immediately, disease and dwindling could set in.

I have also heard that a mourning wreath might be placed on the hive or apiary so passersby would know.

This tradition can be traced back to many countries, especially in Europe. The basic concept is that the bees must be told of the keeper's death so that they will not dwindle and die out of concern and sadness. In most cases the tradition was that the bees should be told before sunrise of the day following the beekeeper's death.

The tradition of "telling the bees" came to America from the Old World. The first settlers with bees were the Pilgrims in 1628.

One of our poets developed the tradition into a poem for Americans. The following poem by John G. Whittier is our tribute to those who have passed on.

Telling the Bees

There are the beehives ranged in the sun.

And down by the brink

Of the brook are her poor flowers, weeds o'ergrown.

Pansy and daffodil, rose and pink

Just the same as a month before.
The house and the trees,
The barn's brown gable, the vine by the door,
Nothing changed by the hive of bees.
Before them, under the garden wall,
Forward and back
Went drearily singing the chore-girl small,
Draping each hive with a shred of black,
Trembling I listened, the summer sun
Had the chill of snow:
For I knew she was telling the bees of one
Gone on the journey we must all go!
Then I said to myself, "My Mary weeps for the dead today;
Happy her blind granddad sleeps
The fret and the pain of age away!"
But her dog wined low, on the doorway sill.
With his cane to his chin
The old man sat, and the chore-girl still
Sang to her bees, stealing out and in.
And the song she was singing ever since
In my ears sounds on:
"Stay at home, pretty bees, fly not hence!
Mistress Mary is dead and gone!"

John G Whittier (1858)