BEEKEEPING IN TARANAKI

By L. H. JOHNSON, Apiary Instructor, Department of Agriculture, Palmerston North.

ALONG with the development of dairy and sheep farming on the grassy plains surrounding Mt. Egmont in Taranaki came the growth and expansion of the beekeeping industry. Although some of the pioneer commercial beekeepers who are still active in the occupation began beekeeping as early as 1909, it was not until Mr. W. F. Lenz brought 400 colonies of bees to south Taranaki in 1914 that several men were encouraged to extend their hive holdings to a full-time occupation and as a sole means of livelihood.

A MEETING was convened at Hawera in 1908 for the purpose of forming a beekeepers' association. The newly formed South Taranaki Beekeepers' Association began with a membership of 21 beekeepers. At the end of a year the number had increased to 30 and continued to multiply until the second year, when the association had the largest membership in the Dominion. In 1914 the association joined the National Federated Beekeepers' Association of New Zealand.

Organised Marketing

Some of the credit for organised marketing also appears to be due to the efforts of south Taranaki beekeepers in forming in 1913 the New Zealand Honey Producers' Association with a capital of £3000. With the establishment of the association the first advance payment for honey was 3⅛d. per pound.

Expansion of Commercial Beekeeping

These co-operative movements were a stimulus that attracted more men to the industry. After the First World War several returned servicemen took up beekeeping as an occupation and have continued until the present.

At least two men started each with a capital of £100 and succeeded in building up to full commercial status without borrowing money. Commercial apiaries were soon established in all the 10 counties surrounding the mountain. A large part of the province is in grass, not much cropping being done, and on these grassy plains are located 346 apiaries containing 10,140 hives, an average of nearly 30 hives per apiary. There are 15 full-time commercial beekeepers and another 7 apiarists owning over 100 hives in the province. The area worked by each commercial beekeeper is approximately three-quarters of a county. Though no new areas have been taken up by beekeepers in recent years, the steady increase in the hive holdings of already established beekeepers will probably continue for a long time. The territory is by no means fully stocked with bees, although there are no unoccupied areas of sufficient extent to support a 400-hive outfit without some encroachment on the areas at present worked.

The logical conclusion is that because of land development, more pockets of good territory will become available and the industry must continue to expand.

Climatic Conditions

The climate of Taranaki is largely governed by the mountain and the altitude above sea level. There is a very great difference in rainfall and temperature between areas near the sea coast and on the central upland. Westerly winds sweep in from the sea and because of the rise of the land, shelter is effective only for a very limited distance. Very heavy losses of field bees during spring are caused by these almost-incessant strong winds. The north-east side of the mountain appears to be much better sheltered. The spring is cold and changeable with short periods of fine weather between rains. Periods of rainfall continue through the summer and spells of consecutive warm sunny days are of comparatively short duration. Weather conditions may be general or local; rain may be falling at Stratford while New Plymouth on the other side of the mountain may have sunshine. Droughts comparable with those of Hawkes Bay are unknown in Taranaki.

Topography

Both the climate and topography of Taranaki are unusual. The plains rise from approximately 100ft. at the sea coast to 2000ft. at the edge of the mountain reserve. Numerous streams which have their sources in the mountain radiate from it like the spokes of a wheel. Although there are times when prolonged heavy rain falls on the mountain, no general flooding of the countryside occurs owing to the