Sweet!

Gunness invention helps beekeepers worldwide

It's been said that necessity is the mother of invention.

Donald Gunness, a former Science student, can prove it.

Thanks to an idea spawned at a grocery store, Gunness developed his Dakota Gunness Uncapper, a device used by beekeepers around the world. The machine takes the wax capping off the honey cells in hives so the honey can be abstracted.

The "gem of the prairie" is built on his farm near Abercrombie with the help of local employees. It is a functional piece built of stainless steel and requires little or no maintenance, Gunness says.

"Our customers call and say they really love this machine, because all we have to do is run it, they say. Nothing seems to go wrong."

Donald Gunness attended NDSSS in 1950, taking Mechanics and related shop courses before entering the armed forces where he enrolled in a diesel mechanic school.

After his military service, Gunness returned to farming near Abercrombie, his home area. He always had ideas about improving machinery and ultimately built his own rear-mounted cultivator. But he failed to patent it, and soon the machine was being produced by the mainline companies as the implement needed to adequately cultivate the heavy soil in the valley.

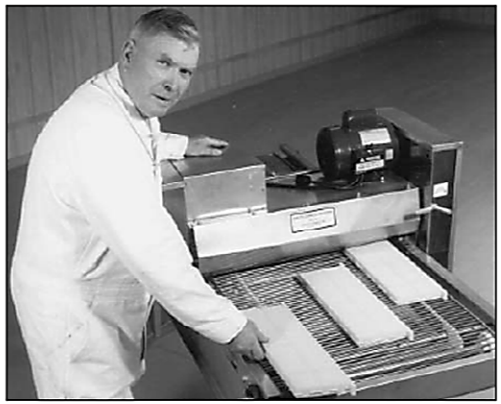
"Oh well, it was a good idea and a good machine, and we used it to farm with for many years," he said. "One should always follow up on his or her ideas."

His next major idea came to him after he went into the beekeeping business. "I was the most unlikely soul in the world to enter this field," he says.

He had two brothers-in-law in the apiary business, and they were encouraging him to see how it was done. He promptly was stung twice by bees. The brothers-in-law assured him the bees were usually friendly if you did not swat at them. Later that day, Gunness began to feel uneasy and soon was covered with welts and rash all over his body. He was rushed to the doctor and found out he was allergic to honey bees.

He lived in fear of bees for a few years.

At left, Donald Gunness pulls a tray of honeycomb out of a hive. Below, Gunness is pictured with his Dakota Gunness Uncapper. The photo was used in 1987 when he first began marketing his invention.



However, an ad for treatment for allergy at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., caught his eye. The treatment made him immune to bee stings and able to enter the business.

Soon after their start, he and his wife, Alice, were uncapping hives with a machine he had purchased. It was a tedious process, having to lift the hives to eye level to insert them in the uncapper vertically. After a few hives, the machine would plug up and malfunction. Soon Alice told him to "get this thing to work or make a good one. This is impossibly ridiculous to spend so much time unplugging this machine."

Since seeing the first uncapper, Gunness had been harboring an idea in his head to improve on this method. A few days later they were in a grocery store, and the grocer was rolling boxes off the truck on a conveyor-type roller. This triggered the method he would put to work as he built his first horizontally fed uncapper, the Dakota Gunness Uncapper. This time, he patented the idea though, and today continues to build the machine sold and distributed all over the world.

When Gunness first approached his brothers-in-law with the invention, they laughed and said he would have combs hitting the ceiling when the honey began to make the surface sticky. He decided to go ahead anyway, and the first year he produced 34 machines, sold primarily in North Dakota to migratory beekeepers.

"The nay-sayers early on predicted it would run for the first year and then the trade journals would be full of used ones, but that proved to be wrong too," Alice says. When someone goes out of business, the machines are always spoken for by a friend or neighbor, she pointed out.

Gunness has purchased the old lumber yard building in Abercrombie and does his metal fabricating at that location using huge presses, punches, cutters and benders to shape the metal parts for the machine. The electric motor-driven machine is assembled at their farmstead.

Alice Gunness handles the phone sales, and son Arthur does the computer work. Calls still come from many locations, including a recent inquiry from Mexico.

"During the last 17 years, we have sold between $2 and $3 million worth of machines to be shipped all over the world. We crate them and ship them to the buyers," the Gunnesses said.

The Dakota Gunness Uncapper is relatively compact. It measures six feet long by three feet wide and stands about 40 inches high. Extensions accommodate more extractors, and Gunness has built a few specialty machines for individuals. One such machine was twice as wide and four times as long and could accommodate eight honey extractors.

The Gunnesses operate about 500 colonies of bees and produced about 80 barrels of honey last year. Each barrel is 55 gallons. It takes 12 bees a life span to produce one teaspoon of honey, Donald said. The average lifetime of a bee is six weeks in the production season; the bees literally work themselves to death.

In addition to manufacturing the uncapper, the Gunnesses are brokers for corn syrup, which beekeepers use to feed the bees during the winter. It costs the beekeepers about $15 to $20 to winter a hive, they pointed out. They broker for Archer Daniels Midland, handling about 10 million pounds of corn syrup each year, sold primarily in California, Texas and the Midwest.

The Gunnesses have five grown children. All were graduates of North Dakota State College of Science. The Gunnesses were pleased to point out that the education the family members received at NDSCS was excellent and prepared them for their future higher education.

Peter graduated from North Dakota State University in Fargo and became an engineer. Mary attended NDSU and married Dr. John Sanderson, a dentist. Sonja graduated from Concordia College, Moorhead, Minn., and she and her husband own and operate a printing business. Arthur graduated from NDSU in soil science and works with his parents in their business. Sarah graduated from Minnesota State University Moorhead, worked in sales and married Dr. Geir Ostrem.

Donald states that what is most encouraging is that an idea can become such an outstanding gift from God. "This is what it was for us," he said.