

## Touring the Clarkson Kelley/Mann Lake plant

Story and photos by Jim Trammel

Your humbly bumbling *BeeLines* editor became perhaps the most bee-ignorant person ever to enjoy a plant tour of the **Kelley/Mann Lake** bee supply plant, given through the courtesy of **Earl King**, trade show developer and a senior employee of the Clarkson facility.

King gave us a recap of how Kelley came to Clarkson (population 700) in 1952 from Paducah and earlier out-of-state locations. The company opened its current larger facility in 2016, attaching a retail store to the manufacturing buildings.

Kelley was purchased last year by Mann Lake, which has had some impact on which lines of beekeeping supply are manufactured in Clarkson and which come from Mann Lake's other facilities. But the Clarkson plant continues to be a major player in the beekeeping and honey industries, and a major member of the Grayson County and Kentucky business communities.

We started our tour in the retail area, where we noted that Kelley has added a line of poultry-raising supplies to its beekeeping-supply line. We toured through the 75-employee suite of offices; the wood shop where beehive components are crafted; the clothing area, where beekeeping veils, gloves and suits are stitched; the waxworks, where beeswax is



Earl King (left) led our touring party, including (continuing left) the 2020 American Honey Princess, Sydnie Paulsrud of Eau Claire, Wisconsin; State Apiarist Tammy Horn Potter; and Sarah Preston, manager of the Certified Kentucky Honey Program (CKHP). Not pictured but also along was the visit's coordinator, KSBA president-elect Tom Ballinger, Butler County Beekeeping Association. The vintage Kelley company vehicle is one of several displayed on the front lawn.

crafted into sheets and prepared for installation into frames; and what will be the beginnings of a company museum, where Mr. Kelley's original equipment is lovingly preserved for the historical record.

Princess Sydnie used the newfound spaces in her itinerary to visit Kentucky's bee businesses, to meet Commissioner Ryan Quarles, and to do a honey sampling and cooking demonstration for the Capital City Beekeepers Association. The Kelley officials presented her with an autographed Kelley logo cap and expressed the hope she would encourage her successors to also schedule a visit.

We weren't allowed to photograph the industry-secretive parts of the plant, but the sights, sounds and scents of the operation will stay in my memory. The particular job I am most impressed with on the production line is held by the worker who, as a continuous sheet of wire-embedded beeswax passes by, cuts it into segments of uniform width for bundling and sale. I didn't dare interrupt, as the worker attended the production line with as much at stake as Lucille Ball keeping up with the passing chocolates on that conveyor belt. The employee calmly lined up and cut one stroke about every three seconds, as the uncut line of product kept on flowing to the work station. A quarter-minute off the line would have caused quite a snarl, but it wasn't going to happen with that steady hand constantly at work. Impressive.

The city of Clarkson annually expresses its gratitude to its major employer with a HoneyFest each September, and of course the health emergency has postponed that for this year. But there will be other years upcoming to congratulate one of the major players and historic businesses in the bee and honey industries.



Princess Sydnie; Earl King and Danna Saltsman in the stitching room.