

Western Bee Supplies, Inc.

Polson, Montana – Member Since January 1966



Have you ever wondered where the sweet nectar of the honey you put on your morning toast came from? TPM's featured member is a complete supply source for the bee keepers of North America and around the world. If you have a question about honey bees, Western Bee can give you an answer!

Western Bee Supplies, Inc. is located in beautiful Polson, Montana. Western Bee began in 1965, and became a TPM member in 1966. A corporation from Illinois was trying to come up with a way to avoid the cross country shipping costs that they were accruing. After researching labor, shipping and lumber availability, the decision came down to Polson, Montana or Baker, Oregon. Polson was chosen because of the beautiful aesthetics of the area with the mountains and Flathead Lake. Thus began Western Bee Supplies, Inc., chosen because Polson is a beautiful place!

Educated as a teaching professional, Dick Molenda was a School District Superintendent in North Central Montana. He often told his boys how much he had loved the mountains and the great times they had before moving to their North Central Montana home. During an earnest conversation one day, the youngest son, Tim, asked why they were living in the Great Falls area and not where they had all the fun in the mountains because he could not remember any of the mountains and he thought they should live there.

Dick mulled this over and began to look for an opportunity to move his family back to the mountains; however, he was unable to find a position in education. By happenstance Dick met the owner of Western Bee and they hit it off. The company owners wanted to sell the company or get a partner who would make the company successful. Dick saw the opportunity and decided to take the chance. He became a partner in 1979 and moved his family to Polson.

Today, the company is run by Dick's sons, Rick Molenda, President and Tim Molenda, Production Manager. After careers of their own, both men found their way back to Polson to work with their Dad and took over the day-to-day operations when Dick retired. Dick said, "Western Bee Supplies was already involved with TPM when I became a partner. George Tichy's expertise was used to lead us through union problems back in the 60s into the early 80s. TPM has continued to help us with all of our HR, Safety and Employee Benefits Programs over the years and has been a very valuable business asset."



Rick, Dick and Tim Molenda



New bee colonies being prepared for their new homes.

Western Bee is a woodenware company, making products for the bee industry. They manufactured items under the name of the companies that they had contracts with. Major contracts were established with Sears and Wards for their catalog distribution of beekeeping supplies as well as the Dadant Corporation whose name has been synonymous with beekeeping since 1863.

During the 1980s, Sears and Wards dropped the catalog business and no longer supplied the beekeeping equipment. The market for beekeeping had dropped substantially. Western Bee diversified and in 1984 Milton Bradley/Hasbro contracted with Western Bee to make natural and colored blocks and the famous Cobbler Bench that we all remember from our childhood. They built the toys and packaged them and then sent them around the country to Milton Bradley warehouses. They were never identified as being made at the Western Bee plant. They contracted with Milton Bradley from 1985-1994 and during that time produced over six million Cobbler Benches and packaged off over 30 million colored blocks. During this time frame, the company was producing on three shifts and had up to 125 employees.

In the mid-90s, beekeeping started coming out of the bottom of its cycle, which coincided with wooden toy sales starting to decline. Bee supplies sales picked up and in particular, over the last ten to fifteen years have increased annually. The beekeeping market has improved over the last fifteen years for many reasons. Science has discovered several things regarding pollination, one of which has been extremely important to certain crop production. For example, through trial and error, almond producers

found that only the honey bee can pollinate almond trees and produce the desired crops necessary for large scale production. Beekeepers can rent their bees for pollination of different crops. And of course, hobbyists, gardeners, ranchers and farmers alike have a passion for the bees that pollinate crops and produce the honey that has always been used to sweeten the foods we eat. The bee industry is increasing in our country as people often find great peace and satisfaction in beekeeping.

Scientists have also discovered that honey bees have very sensitive guidance abilities. Honey bees are now being used to find land mines in Kuwait. Believe it or not, the sensory development of the bees can be trained to seek out sulfur. Sulfur is a major component in land mines, the bees swarm at the land mines, looking for the sulfur, and are tracked by computers. The locations are noted and the soldiers can then deactivate the land mine.



Springtime bee round up! Customers come from all over for new bee colonies each spring.

Western Bee Supplies is the housing contractor of the "Bee" market, producing high quality bee hives. The modern bee hive is like an efficient multistoried factory. Each level of the high rise factory has a specific function, providing a home for the bees and a honey factory for the beekeeper. The hive is made of seven parts, each with its own specific purpose. Starting from the top: Hive Cover, Inner Cover, Shallow Supers, Queen Excluder, Hive Bodies, Bottom Board and the Hive Stand. Easy manipulation of the frames of brood and honey is very important to the beekeeper. The surplus of honey, beyond that needed by the bees to live on and rear their replacement worker bees, is what the beekeeper will remove and market. Western Bee has clients that order customized hives also. They will make custom 8-frame boxes, covers, bottoms, etc. They can make replacements for a customer's existing hives even if the dimensions are not standard. With the customer providing the dimensions, they can produce just what the customer needs.

Western Bee also supplies "packaged" bees in early May of each year for local beekeepers. Packaged bees consist of three pounds or approximately 18,000 worker bees and a queen to start a new hive with. They come packaged in a box with mesh around it. The queen is placed in the middle of the box and the swarm is all around her. The bees come with complete instructions for setting up the hive and Western Bee is only a phone call away if the novice needs some additional encouragement or explanation. In the past, customers have driven over 400 miles to pick up their package of bees on "Bee Day."

Rick Molenda, President, has recently purchased four new machines to aid in production. Two of them are currently in operation. The first is a frame assembly machine that takes the various frame parts produced there, then glues and staples them together with a sheet of beeswax coated foundation inserted in the middle. Molenda says the trend in the industry has moved towards a desire and demand for less labor on the customer end and this machine meets that need. In particular, commercial beekeepers want completely assembled frames ready to drop-in to bee boxes on a moment's notice. This frame reduces labor requirements, and allows the workforce to focus on more important facets of beekeeping such as feeding, medicating, and overall care of the thousands of colonies they have.

Another machine just recently placed into production improves the overall strength of a frame with its new design. This design was created by Dick Molenda in 2008 and after much testing, a machine was created to make this important part. Rick states he strongly believes in the "first to market" concept within the woodenware industry and points out that Western Bee introduced a change to the frame design in 2007 that strengthened the entire frame and their competition soon followed with similar designs. Molenda points out this latest improvement designed by his father will be more difficult to duplicate, and is already receiving accolades throughout North America as a great step forward in the industry.



*A new home for the three pound box of bees.
Inset photo: Bees waiting for pick-up and new homes.*

Two more machines are also due to be placed into production by the end of this summer. The identical machines will produce the actual bee box and improve productivity by reducing changeover time and tightening quality control tolerances. Molenda says in the last two years, Western Bee has produced and sold over one million bee boxes and over ten million frames. "When there is that much wood flowing through the plant, we need to be confident that the product we send out meets our quality control guidelines and tolerances."

Western Bee diversified again in the early 90s and again in 2002 in an effort to become more "green." "We had a lot of scrapwood and sawdust and felt there must be a way to utilize it in a positive fashion," says Molenda. In the early 90s, the company purchased a used pellet mill operation and moved it to Polson and started making wood pellets for pellet stoves. They produce approximately 2,800 tons per year and sell most out the door throughout Montana, Idaho, eastern Washington, British Columbia and Alberta. In 2002, they purchased a shavings baler machine that compacts sawdust shavings into 3.5 cubic foot bales which are sold to feed stores and local customers for stall bedding.

Currently, Western Bee has two shifts operating Monday through Friday, as well as two Saturdays per month. They currently have 65 employees and cut up approximately 20,000 bd. Ft. of random length lumber daily to keep up with customer orders.

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