Joshua D. Friese admits the adage about farms and boys applies to him. “I grew up on a farm, so you can’t take the farmer out of me,” says the family physician as explanation for the life he’s chosen for himself and his family. Friese practices at ACMC Redwood Falls and lives on an acreage with his wife and four children a few miles (three stop signs, he says) outside of town. A few years ago, he built a barn on the property and now is raising a cow, nine chickens, two cats, a dog and several hundred thousand honeybees.

Actually, the adage doesn’t explain the honeybees.

That he blames on his wife, Rachel. “It’s probably more of my wife’s hobby,” he says of beekeeping. “It all started with my wife’s grandfather. She grew up going to his house and having fresh honey all the time,” he explains. “Once you get a taste of real, natural honey, you tend to want more.”

About eight years ago, the couple decided to try their hand at beekeeping. They talked with Rachel’s grandfather to find out how to get started and, one March, made the three-hour drive to Hackensack, Minnesota, to pick up their first box of bees and the equipment needed to set up the hive. (Hackensack is home to beekeeping supplier Mann Lake Ltd.) That fall, their one hive produced “some honey,” and they were hooked.

The bees died over the winter, so the couple started over the next year and have been beekeeping ever since. This year they have eight hives, which stand along the fence near their barn. Friese says each one will have about 50,000 bees “once it’s all up to speed.”

Friese says bees require tending about once a week or so. Early in the spring, when the bees are waking from their winter’s nap, he and his wife place a one-gallon container of sugar water on top of each hive and a “pollen patty” inside the part of the hive where the queen lives. The sugar water stimulates the workers to build the comb and the queen needs the pollen for laying eggs. Once the temperature reaches about 65 degrees, the bees have free range among the family’s apple, cherry and linden trees as well as other flowers and plants.

During the summer months, the beekeepers’ main job is making sure the bees have enough room to grow and make honey. Friese explains that each hive con-
tains a brood box, in which the queen lays eggs and “makes” workers, and smaller “supers,” in which the workers build the comb and make the honey. When a super looks full, the keepers add another one on top. Friese says they check the hives about every 10 days or so.

Sometime after Labor Day, they collect the honey, which means taking off the supers, brushing (or sometimes vacuuming) off the bees and putting the frames containing the honeycomb into a centrifuge that separates out the honey. They filter the honey and then put it into five-gallon buckets, from which they fill smaller jars.

“We give a lot away to friends and teachers,” Friese says. The family also makes lip balm from the bees’ wax.

Friese’s role in the process? “I’m the grunt guy because you have to lift all those heavy boxes. They can weigh up to 50 pounds.”

Actually, he is much more integral to the whole operation than he first lets on. He knows each step of the process and each piece of equipment, and he’s clearly fascinated by the creatures. “You look at the frame,” he says, his voice rising with excitement, “how organized it is; it’s amazing.” He still marvels that bees can fly more than a mile from the hive and find their way back, and that they can communicate where pollen is.

Friese likes the fact that others are fascinated by bees as well. People come to his farm to see them. “They get their suit on and go down there, and we open it up and show them everything,” he says. His patients and staff ask about them, too. He’s glad he can teach his children, who range in age from 8 to 15, about the process.

“I want them to enjoy certain things,” he says, “being outside and caring for nature and living off the land.” And, like his wife, he’s come to love the final product. “The honey is why you do it.” – CARMEN PEOTA