

## THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS



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When Lewis Carroll's "Alice" stepped through the mirror into the "Looking-glass World," she found herself in a land of contradictions and impossibilities come true. She discovered, I might suggest, a place that is strangely reminiscent of "Avocado Land." On the other side of the mirror, nothing happened according to the rules. Very often, that seems to be the case in "Avocado Land," also.

This industry of ours is a little fantastic. We have taken a tree that Nature didn't intend to grow here, and we have planted it, in many instances, in soils classified by the experts as agriculturally worthless. But the trees grow, and produce fruit.

The fruit they produce, however, doesn't have much in common with more familiar fruits. It isn't sweet and juicy; and it can't be eaten right off the tree, like an apple or an orange. It seems more like a "Looking-glass" fruit—more like a vegetable growing on a tree. But it's wonderful.

The producers of this strange crop are, for the most part, not farmers at all. A very high proportion of them have had their major training as doctors, lawyers, merchants, chiefs, business men, manufacturers, school teachers, and the like. A few growers actually purchased their groves by mail—sight unseen. Many growers entered the industry without the slightest knowledge of soils and plants and of horticultural management. They have developed their groves "by guess and by gosh"—often in complete disregard of the rules laid down by the experts. But they have succeeded remarkably well in establishing thriving groves.

Like the *growing* of them, the marketing of avocados has been *achieved* under "impossible" conditions. The fruit was almost totally unknown in this country when it was first introduced commercially—a relatively short while back. There was little about it to excite much interest among potential consumers. Even when purchased as a curiosity, the avocado did not arouse much enthusiasm as a food, and a taste for it had to be

cultivated. There was (and is) a lack of uniformity to the product we offer to the would-be consumer. It comes in all sizes, several colors, many shapes, different textures, over a hundred varieties, and so on. The first great crops occurred in the depths of the great depression, when even established products had difficult sledding. But effective marketing was achieved—largely because growers worked together with an almost evangelistic fervor. To borrow a description from a talk given 35 years ago, they were "avo cranks"—and they still are. It is hard to imagine another group of people who are more enthusiastic than the people of "Avocado Land," no matter what their connection with it.

One of the peculiarities of this industry is its erratic production. We are not favored with uniform or gradually increased crops year after year. Tremendous increases occur from time to time, almost explosively. Doubled production from one year to the next has occurred several times. On one occasion, in mid-depression years, production increased—not twice—but 4 times! In the present year, we have been blessed with a crop as large as the *two* crops produced in 1949 and 1950 combined.

These great increases call for great and special efforts, and the expenditure of sizable sums, to develop consumer interest. Unfortunately, these increases are too often followed by sharp decreases, with consequent inability to serve some of the consumers previously gained. But the industry has progressed—by fits and starts, perhaps—but, net, the direction is forward.

As the industry has prospered, it has attracted newcomers, with new acreage. There are more people to divide the pie. To maintain the value of the increasingly high investments made by these later growers, the industry must constantly lift itself by the bootstraps. We must induce consumers to part with more money for a given quantity of avocados, so that each of the greater number of growers can enjoy a satisfactory return on his investment.

In "Looking-glass Land," the White Queen told Alice, "it takes all the running you can do to stay in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that."

In "Avocado Land," we've been running "at least twice as fast as that" for thirty years or more. And now we've got to pick up speed.

Now I want to borrow Lewis Carroll's looking-glass. Using it in the conventional way, let's look behind us, to see where we've been. Then, like Alice, let's step through to the other side and explore what may be in the future.

In the early 1920's, the annual production of avocados averaged considerably less than a single day's pack in 1952. And yet this organization's Yearbooks of that period contain many references to "low prices"—comparable, in some instances, to the prices of today, and lower—and to excessive production. I find in the 1925-26 Yearbook the statement that "it is a foregone conclusion . . . that the Pacific Coast markets will be unable to consume the 1927 crop." It is interesting to note that the Pacific Coast markets consumed in one recent *week* of 1952 the equivalent of the *entire* 1927 crop.

The problem of that day was met by organized effort to increase demand for the fruit—just as we are doing today.

The worries of the early-day growers were much the same as they are today. I find in the 1924-25 Yearbook the following discussion:

"There is no reason for presuming that the history of the avocado industry will be substantially different from the histories of similar industries . . .

The raisin industry . . . soared to the *dizzy* height of 17¢ per pound, bringing on a great boom of planting, followed by a sharp depression of prices to less than the cost of production . . . The booms and depressions of the citrus industry have been followed by increased plantings in the one case and by the grubbing out or abandoning the groves in the other. Such experiences force upon one the realization of the impotency of the growers' frenzied argument that because it costs so much to produce a crop, the selling price must be sufficient to cover that cost. The only constructive effect that cost of production figures have ever had on prices of agricultural products is indirectly brought about by the greater solidarity and effort on the part of the growers in mending their marketing methods; that is, regulating supply and demand."

It is interesting that the same author predicted at that time that the then greatly increasing number of new growers, with good orchards, could be reasonably sure of making a profit out of avocados. He gave just one reason for his assurance—"the unparalleled spirit of intelligent, generous cooperation that exists among the avocado enthusiasts of California."

Fortunately, that same spirit has largely carried over to later generations of avocado growers.

The pattern of the past three decades has been quite typical from period to period. There have been booms and set-backs in the industry, each with typical results. The booms have invariably resulted in more plantings; the set-backs have invariably brought dissatisfaction, and clamorings for increased market development. They have, fortunately, also usually brought about a higher degree of cooperation, which has made it possible to expand market development activities. Almost irresistibly, regardless of conditions, the direction of this industry has been forward.

This year, in terms of prices received for avocados—as compared with recent years—the avocado industry has experienced an apparent set-back. I will ignore for now the reasons for current lower prices, and I will not now try to persuade you that no set-back has actually occurred. The point is, grower returns are down.

The questions in every grower's mind, then, are "what of the future? What will happen when all these new plantings come into bearing? What's on the other side of the mirror?"

The total California avocado plantings are approaching 20,000 acres. One third of this acreage is not yet in bearing. Barring catastrophes or substantial loss of acreage for some reason, we may obviously expect much larger crops in the future than we have ever seen before.

Can they be marketed at a profit to the grower? Assuredly they can be, long range—unless a lot of us are barking up the wrong tree. They can, that is, if the individual producers in this industry will work harmoniously and cooperatively as an industry, and not as disorganized individuals in destructive competition with each other. Strong as the

cooperative spirit is now, it is not yet strong enough to do the job as effectively as it can and must be done.

The per capita consumption of avocados is still small in most of the markets of the country. Only a relatively small per capita increase is necessary to consume a crop twice the size of what we have produced. The *potential* of greater consumption realistically exists. It will become *actual* consumption only as the result of hard work and money expenditures.

Consumer advertising must be expanded, as the larger crops develop. Dealer service and education will be needed on an enlarged scale to capitalize on the interest stimulated by advertising. Both are part of market development; neither will achieve the best results without the other. Distribution of future crops must be on wide-spread and orderly basis. Costs must be held at the lowest possible level; not only marketing costs, but production costs. The most efficient producer is the one who will profit most.

All of this can be done to good effect, so long as there is a unity of purpose and a unity of effort in this industry. If that unity prevails, we will have nothing to fear from greater production.

Let me finish these comments by putting my ideas on a personal basis. I believe in this industry and the people in it. For that reason, I have cast my lot with you, and have made avocados my life work. Being reasonably ambitious, I would not have done so if I had felt that the industry was unsound or that cooperation among the growers could not be maintained and increased. There is no better way for me to show you my enthusiasm about the avocado industry than to be a part of it.

I do not wish to wake up, like Alice, and find that everything was just a dream, after all.