

## **EXPEDITION TO MEXICO**

(Monterrey-Ciudad Victoria Area)

### **Wells W. Miller**

*Director of the California Avocado Society.*

The journey was arranged by the Foreign Exploration Committee of the California Avocado Society. The function of this committee is to conduct explorations in foreign lands (Mexico and Central America, so far) in search of superior varieties of avocados from the standpoint of fruit quality, resistance to disease, etc. Expeditions have gone out every year for more than twenty years. Chairman Harlan Griswold (San Luis Rey Heights avocado grower) planned, organized, and directed the trip. He did an outstanding job!

The expedition had three principal aims: (1) to give Avocado Society members an opportunity to see how avocados are grown in Mexico; (2) to look for cold-resistant avocado varieties (a severe freeze struck that subtropical area of Mexico in January, 1951, the first in the memory of the residents) ; (3) especially to look for exceptional fruit varieties (marketability, eating qualities, and favorable maturity dates.)

The party consisted of twelve members of the California Avocado Society and ten members of the Texas Avocado Society. The California group included: George Bowker, E. R. Eggers, Harlan Griswold, C. L. Hixon, W. J. Mason, Loren J. Mead, Wells W. Miller, H. W. Montgomery, Guy Steele, Dallas I. Walker, Hugh T. Walker, and Chaffee C. Young. The Texas group included: G. W. Adriance, J. Barrera, Everett Ballard, Ben Chambers, W. C. Cooper, F. G. Griffith, B. G. Hancock, A. H. Krezdorn, Norman Maxwell, and Ed Olson.

The California group met at Tijuana, Mexico, airport Monday, July 28, and emplaned at 11:30 A.M. for Monterrey, arriving there at 9:30 P.M. The Texas group met us at the Gran Ancira Hotel in Monterrey. (Monterrey is about 150 miles west of the citrus and avocado areas of the Lower Rio Grande Valley in Texas.)

The combined party left Monterrey at 9:00 A.M. Tuesday in chartered Ford sedans and headed for Ciudad Victoria, about 200 miles to the south. The trip was scenic and very pleasant, traveling at about 70 miles per hour over an excellent well-paved, but narrow, highway. The countryside was interesting in many ways, especially the miles and miles of citrus groves, some very thrifty looking with lots of corn being grown between the tree rows.

We arrived at Ciudad Victoria about noon, had lunch, and in the afternoon, inspected the fruit ranch of Senor Castro. The trees had been planted some 60 years ago. There was no evidence of methodical spacing or arrangement. There was about every variety of subtropical plant and tree imaginable —avocados, limes, oranges, guava, banana, mango, etc. It really looked like a tropical jungle and was beautiful. There was plenty of

evidence of the 1951 freeze, although new foliage was rapidly hiding it. An interesting item we saw was the bamboo picking poles, extendable, capable of picking avocados from the 50-foot trees. The poles were much lighter than our aluminum ones.

Wednesday we drove north along the highway 25 miles to Llera and then west along an unimproved road which rapidly became so bad that we transferred to trucks. We continued about five miles, hitting terrific chuck holes and wound up at the ranch. From a professional standpoint, this proved to be an outstanding feature of the trip as the planting consisted of some 3,000 seedling avocado trees, set out in a methodical system, about 30' x 30'. Approximately 2,000 of the trees were 20 years old, the balance about five. All the trees looked vigorous and healthy; the older ones were about 30 feet tall.

Since these avocado trees were all seedlings, the variation in fruit types was tremendous. There were all gradations of hybrids between Mexican and West Indian varieties. This mixture of Mexican and West Indian produced striking variations in tree types and in fruit characteristics. Some trees showed no signs of the recent freeze while others still evidenced severe damage. Fruit varied from black to light green, from 4 ounces to 14 ounces, and from pear-shape to round. Our group checked each tree in the planting, inspected the growth habit and general appearance; observed the fruit, cut, tasted it; observed the relation of seed to meat, etc. We were told that the water table stands at 2 feet; yet no root rot was evident in the grove.

The Texas people were particularly interested in black fruit, which sell best down there. The California people were especially interested in green, pear-shaped fruit with high oil content. Both groups found fruit that seemed to have real possibilities for their areas and markets.

We observed that the tree rows supported a tremendous growth of Johnson grass—about six feet high. Also, we learned that the grove is irrigated several times a year, although the rain-fall averages 60 inches annually. No fertilizer is applied, and still the trees show no signs of nitrogen deficiency.

Thursday we left Ciudad Victoria and headed north again, but this time we were to make two principal stops, winding up at Monterrey.

The first stop was at the Estate of Carmen, one of the few remaining great properties of Mexico. It is owned by Senor Enrique Benitez. Sr. Benitez, a cultured, hospitable, well educated gentleman, was largely instrumental in directing us to the various points of interest.

At Carmen we saw a beautiful ranch, a village for the ranch workers, and many interesting avocado trees. Sr. Benitez has been cooperating with avocado experts of the United States for many years and has a sizeable variety-planting, including many of our standard varieties such as Fuerte, Nabal, etc. An interesting feature was the fact that these varieties show sharply different characteristics in Mexico than they do in our country. For instance, Nabal matures in less than a year, is pear-shaped, and is frost-resistant!

Our second stop was at Rancho Santa Engracia, owned by Senor Jose Martinez, a cousin of Sr. Benitez. This is a large ranch, with a magnificent ancient hacienda that is

the last word in beauty and atmosphere. The tropical trees and plants, acres and acres of citrus and honoquen (sisal), were intensely interesting. However, the *piece de resistance* was the tremendous avocado tree growing near the hacienda. This monster was planted by Sr. Martinez' grandfather in 1840, is more than seven feet in diameter (3 feet above the ground), bears well, and the fruit is excellent. Here at Santa Engracia our group was honored by a delicious and elaborate barbecue luncheon, served on long tables under the trees. The Governor of the State of Tamaulipas sent a group of officials, led by the Attorney General, to pay his respects. Sr. Martinez staged several cock fights for entertainment and also had his Arabian stallion put through its paces. This was quite an occasion, all in all.

We spent Friday in Monterrey seeing the city, which is beautiful and a great industrial center, having many points of historic interest. Saturday we returned to Tijuana.

All members of the party were highly pleased with the trip; learned plenty; experienced no discomforts or inconveniences; and were highly impressed by the beauty of the country and courtesy of the people.

Why is Mexico of importance to the U. S. avocado industry, since there are few avocado orchards and almost no intensive, modern avocado production there? What can we learn from Mexico?

The best answer I know of is this: Mexico is a native habitat of avocados; it is the original home of the basic variety of our industry—the Fuerte. In Mexico, avocados grow as back-yard trees, small orchards, and in the wild state; under all kinds of conditions, in wet soil, in heavy soil, in light soil; at sea level, high up on mountain slopes, and on river banks; under rain, forest, and semi-arid conditions. This makes Mexico an invaluable laboratory in which to search for varieties of better eating quality, better maturity dates, shorter bloom-to-picking time, greater frost resistance, greater resistance to root rot, to salt damage, etc. Add to this a not inconsiderable factor: The Mexican people are generally cordial and cooperative, thus greatly facilitating avocado exploration.

"The only avocados seen on any Mexican city market are nondescript seedlings of all sizes, shapes, and degrees of maturity." I quote Dr. J. Eliot Coit. "A pack of uniform Fuerte fruit would be heartily welcomed and it would be many years before the Mexican local demand could be satisfied. Travelers are wont to relate that in Latin American city markets they could buy avocados at a few centavos each. This is true and applies all over Mexico; but what impresses the reflective observer is that these avocados, priced at a few centavos each, are not worth any more than that. However, within a few feet of a basket of these poor, cheap avocados there is generally to be found a stack of beautiful Hood River apples selling at 10 to 15 cents each, American money; also quantities of well-packed grapes from Chile selling at 25 cents a bunch, American. The Mexicans like good fruit and will pay good prices for quality packs.

"However, assuming that after many years the Mexican market could be over-supplied with good Fuertes by local growers, exports to the United States would run into an embargo on account of the seed weevil; and if that were overcome in time, Mexican exporters would still face the 7½ cent per pound import duty."



*At left, California-Texas group inspects avocado planting at Llera. At right, Chaffee Young stands beside vigorous seedling tree in the same grove. Note heavy stand of Johnson grass.*



*At left, members of the touring party at the base of the huge old avocado tree at Santa Engracia. At right, inspection is made of the Carmen Farm of Enrique Benitez. This property was severely damaged by the freeze of 1950-51, but is making good recovery.*