

**DR. J. ELIOT COIT (1880-1976)**



With the passing of Dr. J. Eliot Coit on June 4, 1976 at the age of 96, California lost one of its outstanding horticultural leaders and pioneers of more than ten decades. Born in San Antonio, Texas March 9, 1880, Dr. Coit came from a family associated with American history. John Eliot, a forebear, translated the Bible into the Indian language in Pilgrim days. The Coit family was involved in Pilgrim history. His grandfather was a Presbyterian minister, a faith followed by Dr. Coit throughout the years, and in which he served as an elder in the church.

He began his subtropical career early. Completing his undergraduate training at the North Carolina College of Agriculture, he went on to Cornell for graduate training. Here he was fortunate to have been a student of Liberty Hyde Bailey, one of the great national leaders in agricultural and horticultural education—author, teacher, and educator, whose students have left their mark in this country and many countries abroad.

On the completion of his graduate work at Cornell in 1907, Dr. Coit accepted the position of horticulturist at the Arizona Agricultural Experiment Station and began work in a field that was to keep him busy for the next seven decades—the field of citrus fruits, dates, figs and olives, and, in California, the avocado and the lesser subtropical fruits.

His life divides itself into two periods—academic, consulting and managerial—but always the teacher, whether with grower, professor, former student, or foreign visitor.

As a teacher, he was a thoroughgoing instructor and an older companion of his students in the lecture room, laboratory, and in the field. Soon after Dean Hunt became Dean of Agriculture at Berkeley in 1912, he brought Dr. Coit from the Citrus Experiment Station,

which, in 1911, Dr. Coit had helped develop at Riverside, California, to head the new Department of Citriculture and Subtropical Horticulture at Berkeley. The Department grew rapidly and drew students from abroad, especially Latin America, India, and the Mediterranean countries. His personal interest, understanding, enthusiasm and sympathy, (he had worked his way through college) followed his students throughout their careers; they were always "his boys." They fill important positions at home and abroad as producers, marketing specialists, teachers, researchers and government officials.

During World War I many of the staff of the College of Agriculture went into the state-wide University program of placing Farm Advisors in each county to aid food production, processing and distribution. Dr. Coit was assigned to Los Angeles County, the most important agricultural county in the United States at that time, and took Robert W. Hodgson, one of his outstanding students with him as an assistant.

In 1920 Dr. Coit returned to the Department in Berkeley, and after a year, left the University to enter the commercial field as a consultant and manager. There were those in academic circles who doubted the ability of one so long in academic halls to adjust successfully in the hurly-burly business world. In this second career, he was to become one of the most reliable, trusted, and conscientious advisers on production and marketing problems. He had already become well known through his teaching, extension work, and his publications. His book, "Citrus Fruits," published in 1915, was the first comprehensive manual of its kind published.

Dr. Coit contributed to world-wide horticulture through his many articles in "Bailey's Cyclopedia of Horticulture" and in bulletins, lectures and special visitations to many lands. He was especially active in Southern California horticultural circles. He was a fellow in the American Association for Advancement of Science, a member of Sigma Xi, the national research honorary society, Alpha Zeta, the national agricultural honorary fraternity, and the Gamma Alpha fraternity.

He was already familiar with the emerging avocado industry as it began with the relatively few backyard trees at the end of the first decade and up to World War I. A story often told by Dr. Coit—"About 1908 I took an avocado fruit from a tree in Orange County to Dean Wickson, University of California College of Agriculture. The Dean asked 'what is it?' 'An avocado' was the reply. The Dean continued, 'It looks nice enough but it will never go over commercially because it doesn't have any sugar. All fruit must have sugar.'" Coit mentioned later, "I did not tell Dean Wickson at the time, but technically speaking there are three or four sugars in avocados. You just can't taste them."

He was an early participant in the formation of the California Avocado Association (1914), serving on the first Board of Directors. This was the first effort to draw the scattered growers together to become acquainted, and to begin efforts to solve the then mounting problems—tree propagation, rootstocks, pruning, frost protection, soil and irrigation, and food value of the relatively new fruit in California.

By the conclusion of the war there were enough plantings coming into bearing to flood the local markets with many different varieties varying in quality from poor to choice. It was obvious that steps had to be taken for an orderly marketing program. Dr. Coit took

a leading part in launching a cooperative program and served on its Board of Directors for its first 20 years. He was instrumental in securing George Hodgkins from the Sunkist citrus marketing organization to be the first manager. The organization developed steadily, becoming the Calavo Growers as we know it today. Many of its members had been through the problems of marketing citrus fruits, which saved the fledgling avocado industry from repeating those experiences.

At the very start the young avocado association began publishing an annual yearbook. This publication became the "bible" of the new industry. Dr. Coit was made an honorary member of the California Avocado Association in 1918, and in 1956 was given its first Award of Honor. The society again honored him in 1963 by the title "Director Emeritus."

Dr. Coit was the editor of the Yearbook from 1925 to 1940, not a new experience for him. In his undergraduate days in North Carolina he had edited the college agricultural journal, as a graduate student at Cornell. Under Liberty Hyde Bailey he edited the "Cornell Countryman." As a teacher he insisted on clarity of expression and conciseness, oral or written. He became popular as a public lecturer and writer. His classroom had lost its walls, and his students included all those growing citrus and subtropicals, whether a backyard tree, or orchard plantings of hundreds of trees. His kindly and understanding criticism and suggestions, his warm encouragement and enthusiasm will long be remembered. His footprints up and down orchard and nursery rows will long remain, and his satisfying pipe and accompanying observations will be missed in board meetings and committee discussions. His students will never forget the hand on the shoulder, his pride in them, and his commendation. We, who have been his students and associates are most fortunate.

—*Knowles Ryerson*

—*Art Schroeder*