

A Pilgrimage (1929) To The Parent Fuerte Tree

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George B. Hodgkin (1893-1969) was Secretary-Manager of Calavo Growers of California.

This essay was originally a radio talk given by Mr. Hodgkin in December, 1929. It is believed that this is its first appearance in print.

Salud Amigos: Down in the little village of Atlixco, in the Valley of Puebla, there is a horticultural shrine among some eight hundred Christian shrines and innumerable Indian or Aztec shrines. This horticultural shrine is the Mecca of avocado growers. It is the huerta of Señor Don Alejandro LeBlanc, situated at Calle Manuel Buena Rostro No. 2, Atlixco, Puebla, Mexico.

There at the foot of ancient San Miguel, behind high old adobe walls, stands the original Fuerte tree amidst guavas, cherimoyas, sweet limes, oranges, sour limes, coffee beans, other aguacates, paguas, sapotes, and many other interesting fruits with jawbreaking names.

This original Fuerte tree is only some thirty-five feet in height, and about the same in breadth. It looks a bit the worse for wear, or rather from lack of attention. At the time of our visit, on the 18th of November, 1929, there were only a few fruits on it — all of them somewhat stunted. The few that we sampled were of a flavor somewhat inferior to the best that we produce here in California. This famous tree has probably had little or no attention since it was first planted; and it is only because Nature has been so good to it, that it has been able to grow at all.

Our party consisted of Mr. Carl Newman, Mr. Albert Thille, Mrs. Hodgkin and myself, and Mr. Carl Schmidt of Mexico City, who had very kindly consented to pilot us on our pilgrimage. Mr. Schmidt is the man who, some eighteen years ago, first discovered the Fuerte tree and started it on its way to fame when he sent a number of buds to his friend, Mr. F. O. Popenoe, of the West India Gardens, Altadena.

It is a noteworthy fact, showing the difference in horticultural methods in Mexico and California, that so far as we were able to learn there is only *one* Fuerte tree in the whole Republic of Mexico, whereas there are literally hundreds of thousands of Fuerte trees in California, the adopted home of the Fuerte.

Everything grows in Mexico — grows apparently in spite of mankind; whereas here in California we have to struggle to keep our trees alive. We have to bring water from long distances to irrigate, fertilize, and cultivate in order to produce fruit; but in Mexico, the trees grow wild. There is, therefore, no attempt in Mexico at pest control, standardization, variety selection, or any of the ordinary horticultural practices that we

know so well here.

Lake all prophets, the Fuerte is not recognized in its own country. If it ever attains fame there, it will be because it is reflected from its adherents in California.

Unfortunately, Señor LeBlanc was not at home, but Señora LeBlanc very kindly showed us through the huerta and gave us many samples of the various fruits to taste. Señora LeBlanc told us that the fruits of the Fuerte tree were never sold — they were too good to sell, but were eaten at home or given to their friends — that they were unique and different from any other aguacates grown in the Republic of Mexico.

The parent Fuerte tree usually produces two crops every season. The first crop matures in June and July, and the second crop from October to January. In this matter, also, the Fuerte is said to be unique.

So far as we were able to determine, most varieties of aguacates in Mexico mature about two months earlier than the same varieties in California. It is well to remember, however, that maturity is a relative term; and in Mexico, many aguacates are picked many months before they have reached maturity, there being no standard of maturity such as is adhered to here for calavos [*reference here is to a trade name—Ed.*].

We were extremely interested to learn that the Indians as far back as we have any records, have found it necessary to distinguish between the good and the poor grades of fruit by the use of two well-accepted names — *paguas* and *aguacates* — in the same manner that California growers have found it necessary to call their better fruit "*calavos*" and their poorer fruit just ordinary *avocados* or *alligator pears*. Though the definition of a "pagua" varied somewhat with the informant, two descriptive adjectives were used almost universally: "inferior" and "insipid" (*dulce*). It is quite likely, therefore, that "pagua" is used to describe not only the poorer varieties of fruit, but immature fruits of good varieties as well; and aguacate is applied to only the fruits of good flavor, just as "Calavo" is used here to distinguish the mature *avocados* of good varieties.

Near the huerta of Señor LeBlanc, just outside the outskirts of the town of Atlixco and watched over by the perpetual snows of the sleeping lady, Ixtactihuatl, and the old volcano, Popocatepetl, lies the once prosperous, beautiful Hacienda de Xalpatlaco. There, Mr. Schmidt took us to see a fine old aguacate tree that he had thought to be one of the best in Mexico. Some ten years ago, this beautiful hacienda supported a family in wealth, with many Indians producing maize, frijoles, and pulque in its broad fertile fields. Now we found the road impassable except on foot or with the aid of their little jack-rabbit burros. The stone walls of the huge grain storerooms were crumbling. The water-driven machinery and tools had been removed, the patio of the hacienda was a temporary resting-place for stray goats and burros. The private chapel was demolished. The graveyard was full of weeds. The hinges of the gate creaked with rust. Weeds, fruit flies, weevils, and other pests converted the huerta into a shamble. The old aguacate tree still stood there, holding out against the ravages of Nature — some seventy feet high and nearly as broad. There were some fruits on it, but all of them were too high for us to reach. We did, however, secure buds which we sent to Washington for propagation.

When we asked the old Indian caretaker what had brought about this destruction, he

replied that the land had been divided up among the people into small parcels; and that "*esto perro de muchos amos esta el primera de muerte de hombro*" (the dog of many masters is the first to die of hunger). These deserted haciendas with their crumbling walls and dry fields are typical of Mexico. The rich country could support many times the present population. Unfortunately, revolutions and an unsettled political situation combine to make all agricultural development unstable, at least for the man who would plant on a large scale.

Undoubtedly, there are in the Republic of Mexico many fine varieties of aguacates that have not yet been called to the attention of California producers. In the little towns of Pueblito and Canada, near Queretaro, there are thousands of trees growing wild — all of them seedlings and producing different varieties. The same is true in the neighborhood of Cuernavaca, Guadalajara, and many other places.

I can think of no more fascinating or worthwhile vacation for one interested in avocado production in California, than to spend a few months in the aguacate-producing sections of the Republic of Mexico, searching out these good varieties and sending budwood to Washington for propagation. An expedition should be made during the months of July to January, so as to secure varieties most needed in California. Such an expedition would not be an easy one, for there is little or no information regarding varieties or the location of particular trees. It would be necessary first to discover the fruits in the market, and then follow them back to their source; which would necessitate going into the by-ways of the country, far from the usual haunts of *turistas*. As to the safety of the explorer: While we were in Mexico, we were reminded on several occasions that we were probably far safer than we could be in Cicero or Peoria.

Strangers in Mexico are made to feel at home, for the Mexicans are not only hospitable and courteous, but they are tremendously fond of trees, fruits, and flowers. This sign on a country roadside near Culiacan was eloquent of the spirit of the people: "*Caminantes las frutas son para ustedes. No pompan los arboles.*" (Travelers, the fruits are for you. Don't break the trees.)

He, who goes to discuss horticulture, will find a welcome awaiting him at the proudest haciendas.