

Eugenio Schieber

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The Avocado Society and the avocado world lost a wonderful and talented friend January 3, 1994, when Dr. Eugenio Schieber died in Guatemala from complications following abdominal surgery in late December, 1993. Dr. Schieber had a marvelous, full professional career of 33 years in tropical plant pathology, tragically prematurely terminated at the early age of 63.

Gene Schieber lived a fulfilling, vigorous, and enthusiastic life and had many good friends in many countries of the world resulting from his extensive travels in his study of a wide-ranging number of plant disease problems. He was born of German parents on a coffee farm in the little village of Parramos in the central highlands of Guatemala, near the beautiful colonial city of Antigua.

Dr. Schieber's first employment was in 1951 with the Instituto Agropecuario Nacional (IAN)—the government Experiment Station—in Guatemala City. I first met this bright-eyed, eager young scientist there in 1952 when beginning our University of California search for *Phytophthora* resistant avocado rootstocks in Latin America. Gene later took time off from the Experiment Station to pursue university studies in the United States. He was a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Arkansas from 1954-56, and then took graduate work at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, from 1956-59. He received his Ph.D. degree in plant pathology in 1959, studying under Dr. James Dickson, noted international specialist in diseases of field crops.

On his return to Guatemala in 1959, Gene became head of the Department of Plant Pathology at the IAN and continued in that position until 1971. He began his prolific

international travels at this time, and soon became internationally recognized for his research on diseases of corn, beans, and coffee. He visited a number of tropical countries in relation to coffee rust and general coffee diseases, and also made surveys of tropical plant disease problems.

Gene Schieber made two trips to Africa, sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Central American Plant Protection Institute, studying and advising on coffee rust, other coffee disease problems, and corn rust. In that research, he visited Angola, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rhodesia, Senegal, and South Africa. He also traveled extensively in Central and South America and the Caribbean for consultations sponsored by USAID, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the German government's agricultural aid program (GTZ), the organization of American States, and the Rockefeller Foundation. Gene made six trips to Brazil, largely in relation to coffee rust that invaded this hemisphere, first Brazil in 1970, coming from western Africa.



Dr. Schieber displays plaque and medal of honor awarded in 1986 by the California Avocado Society

In 1971, Dr. Schieber resigned from his position at the Instituto Agropecuario Nacional to work as an international consultant in tropical agriculture, especially in plant pathology.

We at the University of California at Riverside were very fortunate to be able to hire him part-time to work on our ongoing program of collecting native avocados and related species of *Persea* in Latin America in the search for resistance to *Phytophthora* root rot.

Gene was the ideal person for this position because of his knowledge of the countries in Central America, his interest in botany, and his proficiency in Spanish. He continued in our collaborative position until December 1993, and made hundreds of interesting and

valuable rootstock collections for our California avocado program. Among Dr. Schieber's significant collections are the following:

Persea steyermarkü (Aguacate de Montaña)—a species closely related to *P. Americana*, the avocado first collected from the mountains of Guatemala by botanist Julian Steyermark in 1940. We had been looking for this unique tree since the 1950s, so when Gene started to work with me, I gave him the rough descriptions we had of early collections. Gene wrote me with great excitement in 1973: he had found large trees of what he was sure was the "Aguacate de Montaña" near the original 1940 description site. I soon went with him to this remote location in the north central Guatemalan highlands, where it was a great thrill to see this unique tree! We collected leaves, flowers, and the round, avocado-like fruit. It is a valuable germ plasm collection, as we think *P. steyermarkii* is one of the progenitors of the commercial avocado; the collection has shown some resistance to root rot and is compatible with avocado.

G6—a collection from the slopes of the volcano Acatenango, near Antigua. This is a Mexican-type tree, with small purplish-black fruit. It has shown moderate resistance to root rot, and has been tested and propagated extensively in California.

G755 (Martin Grande)—one of Gene's collections with the most resistance, this was a market collection from Cobán in north central Guatemala. This collection turned out to be a hybrid between the avocado and another native species of *Persea* in Guatemala (*P. schiedeana*) that grows commonly in the hills near Cobán. As a rootstock, it appears to have some production problems that are to date unsolved.

Persea nubigena—a native species of *Persea* related to and probably another progenitor of the avocado. We first collected this in the 1950s in Honduras and Guatemala. Gene has found many additional sources of this species in Mexico, El Salvador, and other areas of Guatemala.

Aguacate mico—another primitive, avocado-like tree. Gene has followed up our early collections in 1952 in El Salvador by additional collections in Guatemala and Nicaragua. He and I have tentatively described this as *Persea tolimanensis*, from his discovery of specimens on the slopes of the volcano Tolimán near Lake Atitlán in Guatemala.

Guatemalan criollos—many collections from the huge and varied population of Guatemalan avocados (*Persea americana* var. *guatemalensis*) that grow in semi-wild conditions in much of highland Guatemala. Some of these have shown significant resistance to root rot and are being propagated for further tests. Also, some are of interest for possible drought-resistance and frost tolerance.

This is merely a brief summary of the wide-ranging and diverse collections that Gene Schieber has made over the past twenty-two years of our UCR program of avocado rootstock resistance and *Persea* germ plasm collection. Originally strictly a plant pathologist, he developed an abiding interest and expertise in taxonomy of *Persea*—an auxiliary project on which he and I have collaborated for these years. He made a truly

monumental contribution to our program and to general knowledge in this special tropical field.

Gene was an able, charismatic, and knowledgeable colleague and an excellent and inveterate photographer. Travel with him on many collection trips in Latin America, especially in the spectacular highlands of Guatemala, provided to me remarkable experiences: to the remote northern Todos Santos Cuchumatán, Cobán, and Tactic in Alta and Baja Verapaz; Tecpán, Patzún, Solo la, Retalhuleu; mountains west of Quetzaltenango; Panajachel; Santiago Atitlán, and other villages circling Lake Atitlán; up slopes of volcanos Agua, Acatenango, Tajumulco, Tolimán, Tikál, etc.

Gene published many articles on his scientific contributions in journals such as the Annual Review of Phytopathology, Fitotecnia Latinoamericana, Turrialba, Plant Disease Reporter, Phytopathology, Revista Cafetiera, Sociedad Alemana de Cooperación Técnica, Coffee, and the California Avocado Society's Yearbook. His many papers in the Yearbook provide an informative summary of many of the avocado and *Persea* collections.

This dedicated scientist had many friends in the California Avocado Society and among avocado growers in South Africa and Spain. He visited California several times in connection with our cooperative program on rootstock resistance and visited many groves. While at the 1986 annual meeting of the California Avocado Society, he was awarded its Medal of Honor. To quote from the award ceremony: "Eugenio Schieber has made many contributions to the California avocado industry during his extensive botanical explorations and collections in the past fifteen years, and is certainly a very deserving and worthy recipient of the 1986 Award of Honor."

Dr. Schieber's parents passed away a number of years ago. Since his father's death, Gene took care of and managed some of the Schiebers' coffee plantings in the Guatemalan highlands. He is survived by brothers and sisters in Guatemala and by nieces and nephews in Antigua and Guatemala City. He will be greatly missed by his relatives and by his myriad friends around the world, including many avocado growers, and especially by those of us at UCR.

