

California Avocado Association 1917 Annual Report 3: 75-77

JOSEPH SEXTON—AN APPRECIATION

(Prepared by special request of Board of Directors by Mr. C. W. Beers, Horticultural Commissioner, Santa Barbara County)

It is a rare privilege to know a large-hearted, generous-souled man who is possessed of a dream reaching out to embrace all the individuals of a vast state.

To know such a man during the closing years of a long practical, eventful life, and to feel the breadth of his sympathies and his appreciation, at the time when his faculties were ripe and strong and virile was the privilege of many who knew Joseph Sexton of,— I was about to say Goleta, but it would be nearer the truth to say, of California.

Joseph Sexton was born in the state of Ohio, not far from Cincinnati, in the year 1842. He came to California when only ten years of age. In his youth he was in love with plants, and flowers, and fruits and this passion grew upon him and matured with him.

His early surroundings forbade him the privilege of scholastic associations; however, the world has numerous examples of men who succeeded without the university experience that is so necessary that most of us may become even passably useful.

It was this spirit of success that developed in the man through his love for the things that grow and spread beauty and usefulness to his fellowmen, —a spirit that makes man generous, broadly sympathetic, helpful, and heartily co-operative, with all that makes for excellence throughout the whole range of his acquaintance.

It was to his untiring care and sensitive appreciation that he owed the skill to detect excellencies as they appeared in the midst of the commonplace. And this it was which made it possible for Mr. Sexton to bring to such high perfection the Santa Barbara soft-shelled walnut. He had visions that could not be confined within his own local field of action and one of them has broadened until it has encompassed the whole length and breadth of the country to which he was so loyal, the walnut which he propagated being found in every state in the union where such trees grow and prosper.

Our friend being of a congenial nature naturally sought out the association of kindred spirits and he had the friendship of all of the earlier horticultural dreamers who had imaged California as the home of every plant, shrub, and tree either of usefulness or of beauty. Coming to Santa Barbara in 1867 he made the acquaintance and found fellowship with other plant lovers and no doubt he looked with deep interest on the two little avocados which Dr. Kellogg of San Francisco sent to his old friends Mr. Silas Bond and Judge Ord,—the two trees that became the parents of hundreds of avocados now growing throughout the city. A long-time friend, Mr. Taft of Orange, had become enthusiastic over the avocado industry and through him Mr. Sexton obtained in 1911, a number of seedlings which he planted at his home place in Goleta and which have developed into splendid specimens which have borne abundantly.

Without question the thrift of these trees and the heavy bearing nature which they

manifested stimulated anew the visions in the fertile mind and heart of our friend. He conceived and elaborated a plan whereby the avocado industry of the whole world might be benefited through the introduction of new varieties carrying all of the excellencies and few of the undesirable qualities of those then known.

He became satisfied that in the Hawaiian Islands were hardy varieties that could be grown in California. And in the fall of 1911 he visited Honolulu for the express purpose of gathering the avocado from the trees, testing out the most desirable varieties, and saving the seeds from those choice fruits with the hope that by planting them: in California the much desired improved fruits might be developed.

From the seeds brought home at that time a large number of thrifty seedlings were grown and potted and were distributed throughout the state. This custom Mr. Sexton followed at periods of two years, and today it is conservative to say that there are a thousand of these trees growing in different sections, from which not only can be determined the best varieties, but that equally important fact the sections in which the avocado will find itself at home. The beautiful part of this work was the generous attitude toward the avocado industry, absolutely free from any spirit of commercialism.

True to his natural instinct Mr. Sexton began experimenting with local varieties, hoping thus to improve those that had already made themselves a place. Into one of his seedlings he introduced a bud from the Dr. White avocado and in twenty-two months from the time of budding he had 60 mature fruits and had removed as many more that had definitely set. This tree has averaged two crops a year up to the present time and Mr. Sexton often remarked that it seemed likely a tree will be developed which will have mature fruits every month in the year.

On his return from Hawaii in 1913, Mr. Sexton brought home bud-wood from two choice trees growing in the island, the Nutmeg and the Inezholt. These buds have developed into magnificent trees but what the fruits will be in California remains to be seen. In 1914 he secured budded trees of the Inezholt and found it as hardy as the Lyon.

In the experimental ground of Mr. Sexton's home are seventy-eight varieties including the best known fruits of California. Here the frost sweeps from the foothills at times and this has enabled him to test out the different varieties side by side as to hardiness. In these grounds he has found the Blake endures frosty weather like a young oak; the Lyon makes as large a fruit as the Taft; and he has also confirmed the fact that the Lyon seeds come true to type which makes it a very desirable variety.

In 1916 Mr. Sexton made his last trip to Honolulu, at which time he selected budwood from four trees bearing excellent fruits of large size. The budwood arrived after his death and today there are from seven to ten trees of each variety growing in the experimental grounds at his former home.

In August 1917 this friend of Nature and lover of the beautiful and excellent in plant life laid aside his activities, being called to his rest in the ripe maturity of a happy, helpful life. The fullness of his work will be realized only by those who follow after, and the avocado industry will ever have an occasion to be appreciative of the man whose vision led him into ceaseless activity without thought of commercializing the results of his earnest effort and whose broad sympathies made him happy in serving his fellow man.

In the passing of Mr. Sexton the California Avocado Association has lost an appreciative member, one whose presence was an inspiration and whose words always breathed a hopeful expectancy that stimulated the activities of all those associated in these early days of the avocado industry in the State of California.

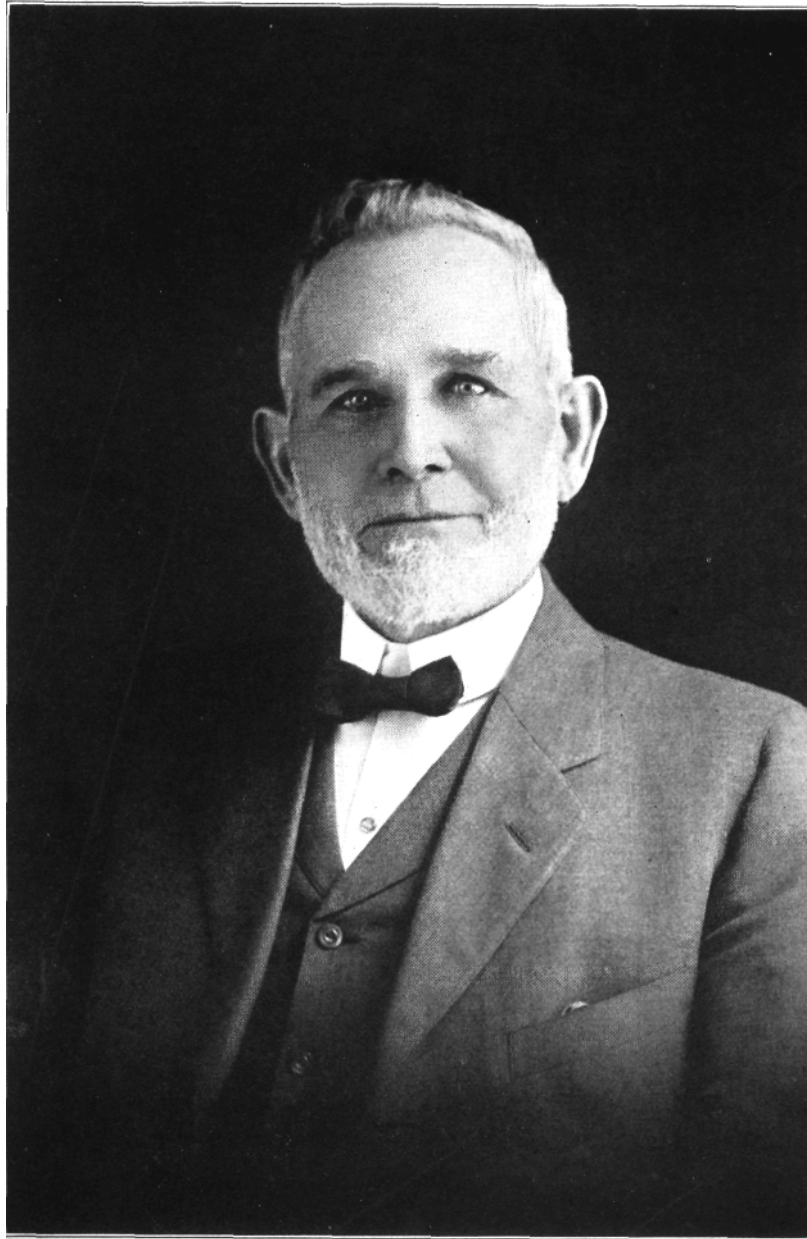


Plate II. Figure 3

Joseph Sexton of Santa Barbara
Pioneer Avocado Grower

RESOLUTIONS ON THE DEATH OF JOSEPH SEXTON

Adopted by the Board of Directors of The California Avocado Association

It is with feelings of sadness and bereavement that the California Avocado Association has learned of the passing away of the well loved Joseph Sexton, an honored member of the Association, and one of the revered fathers in California horticulture, who cherished the soil as a treasure house of comforts, delight, and happiness for humanity.

His peaceful passing from earthly life may be pictured and likened to a choicely ripened and mellow fruit falling to the ground in his well nurtured orchards and gardens.

A faithful friend of the avocado, he traveled far to find the best, and bring it to his own land, and among the last acts of his kindly life was to have painted, facsimiles of all the better known varieties of the noble fruit, for the purpose of presenting to the Association.

This testimony expresses our pleasure in his life, and our sorrow in his leaving it.

To his family we give our sympathy in their great loss.