

C. P. TAFT, AN AVOCADO PIONEER

Wm. McPherson

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In these days we are more and more honoring the pioneers and founders. Los Angeles celebrated with a great fiesta in September the founding of the city by a few Mexican families. The avocado industry has now grown great enough to look back and honor its pioneers and founders.

Mr. Charles Parkman Taft was born in Ohio in 1856. He was educated at Racine College, Wisconsin, and then taught school two or three years. He came to California in 1882, first to Duarte and then settled at Orange in 1883. He bought twenty-three acres of land two or three miles north-east of town, and, in addition to this, farmed an adjoining place—altogether fifty-two acres.

He first planted vines and deciduous trees as others were doing then. But Mr. Taft has ever been an experimenter with fruits—a Luther Burbank on a smaller scale. He was satisfied to let others grow the fruits that were commonly planted, while he tried out the uncommon. He began with the loquat—a very important fruit in Japan. At that time it was grown as a seedling tree in the yards of Southern California. His first loquat trees were seedlings bought from the Sibley Nursery at Santa Ana. For many years Mr. Taft worked with it as Luther Burbank worked with fruits, planted many seedlings, tried out the fruits that resulted, kept selecting and rejecting till he had the varieties of value that we know today. The Champagne, commonly recognized as the best loquat variety, was propagated by him. Others of his varieties are the Early Red, Premier, and Advance. The loquat industry is not as important as the avocado industry, but what it is today in the United States is chiefly due to Mr. Taft.

Another oriental fruit that early attracted his attention was the persimmon. Here there was already a wealth of varieties imported from Japan. It was a question of finding which was the best for California. The Hachiya was not unknown then. The Tanenashi was also considered as good. He sent to a nurseryman at St. Marys in Georgia for Tanenashi trees. Fortunately a few Hachiya were included among the trees sent to Mr. Taft. He soon recognized the Hachiya as superior to all other varieties. He planted the persimmon commercially to the extent of some acres. I once heard him say that they never have found and never will find a better persimmon than the Hachiya. He experimented with persimmon root-stocks and was perhaps the first to use the lotus or wild persimmon stock for persimmons in California.

Some time in the nineties, just when, he doesn't remember, he saw an avocado fruit on display. It was from one of the early Los Angeles trees. His interest was awakened in this new fruit. Though he didn't know it, the avocado had already been introduced into

the county. At Tustin, on the main street, are still growing the first avocado trees planted in Orange County. They were brought as little seedlings from the State of Nuevo Leon, Mexico, by

Mr. Sherman Stevens in 1891. They bore a small fruit of no particular excellence. With seed from these trees and other Mexican seed, was planted the row of trees on the Samuel Tustin property on the east side of what is now the State Highway. These were planted in the middle nineties. In widening the state highway, part of them have been taken out.

Having seen the avocado displayed, it was characteristic of Mr. Taft that he should want to try it. In 1899 he bought two fruits of the well-known old-time firm of Ludwig & Matthews at the Mott Market on Main Street in Los Angeles and planted the seed from them. These were Mexican type fruits. One of the seedlings he kept. It turned out to be a rather poor bottle-necked fruit. The other seedling tree went to Mrs. J. H. Northrop of Newport Road, northeast of Tustin, and we are quite sure it became the parent tree of the Northrop variety. The next year Mr. Taft planted more seed from fruit obtained at the Mott Market. Some of these fruits were thick-skinned. The Taft variety resulted from one of these seedlings.

About this time he became acquainted with Mr. Juan Murietta, an earlier pioneer of the avocado in California. Mr. Murietta planted his first avocado tree in 1891. Afterwards, he imported fruit from Mexico and planted the seeds, and also gave away seeds to people who were interested in the avocado. From him Mr. Taft obtained seeds as early as 1900 and 1901. From some of these seeds came a seedling that was sold to a Mr. Gockley, who lived on the place adjoining Mr. Northrop on Newport Road. This became the well-known Sharpless variety.

Within a few years Mr. Taft had trees bearing and he began to raise nursery stock, budding from some that were the better ones. If Mr. Taft was not the first man to bud avocado trees in California, he was certainly among the very first. The first budded tree he ever sold was the Carey Smith tree, which was planted by Mr. Smith on North Main Street, Santa Ana. Another early budded tree was one that he named the Champion. He took small budded trees of this variety to Ludwig & Matthews, and he afterwards learned that they had been bought by Chas. Silent and J. M. Elliott. Mr. Taft originated quite a number of avocado varieties, as you may see by looking in the check list. The best one is the one bearing his own name. It first bore in 1909, when it had a crop of six fruits. Then it skipped a year, and afterwards bore rather regularly. It was a surpassingly fine fruit and Mr. Taft budded from it extensively. Mr. F. O. Popenoe also took it up and propagated it extensively and had much to do with popularizing it. But the variety was slow in coming into bearing, and trees propagated did not seem to bear as well as the parent tree. Mr. Utt planted quite a number, but none of those he planted are as good bearing as the parent tree. After some years, it ceased to be commercially planted. We are still looking for a variety to replace it, the fruit of which is as good as the Taft variety— it may be the Nabal. Certain strains of the Taft that seem to bear better are now being budded. If so, the Taft will again be planted commercially.

Perhaps Mr. Taft's greatest contribution to the avocado industry was that he seems to have been the first to recognize the commercial possibilities of the new fruit. At first the

avocado was a fruit for the yards of amateurs. Mr. Taft, having tried it, believed that here was an important fruit that California could raise in quantity, and he recommended its commercial production.

At a Farmers' Institute in Tustin in 1906 or 1907 he read his first paper on the avocado (or "alligator pear" as it was then called) which seems to have been the first time that the avocado appeared on a program at a California meeting. In the first yearbook of the California Avocado Association there was an article by Mr. Taft, in which he refers to that Institute Meeting at Tustin and what he had to say there. At that same institute it is interesting to note that Mr. Taft exhibited the Papaya fruit, which is now beginning to be commercially planted in California. At this meeting he urged the commercial possibilities of the avocado and prophesied an important future for it, ending with the words, "Will the next horticultural craze be over the alligator pear?" Well, it certainly was.

His paper, or parts of it, was published a number of times after that Institute and it had great influence. Perhaps C. E. Utt and Sherman Stevens took notice of it, for in 1907 they planted the first seedlings on the San Joaquin Fruit Co. land. In Anaheim a young man of the name of E. C. Button read the paper as published and decided that he would get in on the ground-floor of the coming boom, if there was to be one. He obtained seeds from the Alexandria Hotel at Los Angeles in the winter of 1908-09 and planted them. Thus originated the Anaheim, Dutton, Linscott, Ace, and other varieties, some grown by him and some by people to whom he gave young seedling trees. A few months later Mr. Dutton says he hitched up and drove over to see Mr. Taft. He wanted to buy budded trees of him. Mr. Taft had none just then, but Mr. Dutton does remember that he did get Feijoa plants of him.

At that time, Sam Thompson was a nurseryman on Chapman Avenue, east of Orange at McPherson. He, too, was interested in the avocado. From Mr. Taft and from other sources he obtained seeds and later buds. His nursery became an important source of avocado trees and there are many people growing avocados today who started by getting their first trees of Mr. Thompson long ago.

The first great impetus in avocado growing came about 1911. We might say that 1911 was the end of the ancient times in avocado history and then began the medieval period. In that year W. D. Stephens of Montebello and also F. O. Popenoe of the West Indian Gardens introduced budwood from Atlixco, in the State of Puebla in Mexico. The Stephens importations were mostly lost in the frost of 1913, but from the Popenoe importations we have the Fuerte, Puebla, and other varieties.

C. E. Utt and Sherman Stephens planted a large nursery that year, obtaining the seed from Mexico. Much of it spoiled while held at El Paso, due to customs delay. These nursery trees were mostly budded to the Taft variety and in 1913 fourteen acres were planted, part at Lemon Heights and part on the San Joaquin Fruit Co. lands. Mr. Utt and Stephens with this planting stepped right up to the front in avocado growing, a ranking they have held ever since.

Mr. Taft was one of the organizers of the California Avocado Association in 1915 and was a member of the first board of directors. In the first two year-books you will find papers by him—the one in the first book is of great importance in considering the history of the present industry.

Three or four years ago, Mr. Taft, having passed the ripe age of three-score and ten, sold his ranch and moved into Orange, where he now lives. There he now continues his horticultural experiments on a smaller scale in the back-yard. He has an avocado tree that he has budded and grafted to various varieties, and a dozen of these varieties have already borne fruit. He has long been interested in the Feijoa and has produced some varieties of it. In his back-yard now he has quite a number of Feijoas. One of the last foreign fruits that attracted his attention was the Jaboticaba, a valuable fruit in Brazil. This fruit was important enough for Mr. Wilson Popenoe to have a full page picture of it in his book on Sub-tropical Fruits. The tree was sent to Mr. Taft by a Brazilian who had visited his ranch. He doesn't know of any other tree of this variety in Southern California, but said if I mentioned it, it might bring forth the location of others. The Jaboticaba is a curious fruit in one way. The fruit is borne without stems right on the trunk and branches.

The California avocado industry has now grown important. Ten thousand acres are now planted. That was not in the dream of the most enthusiastic twenty years ago. What the industry has become and its increasing greatness in years to come, it owes to a great extent to the pioneers of years ago whom we honor today, such as Mr. Taft.