

California Avocado Association 1935 Yearbook 20: 50-52

Lester Keller, M.D., F.A.C.S.

Director California Avocado Association, 1918-21



Dr. Keller was one of the pioneer avocado growers, who did much to promote the best interests of the industry in its earlier days and consistently helped to bring it in its most favorable light before the public to the last year of his life.

Dr. and Mrs. Keller drove overland to California in a Ford roadster in 1914. Today when thousands of cars make this trip every year over good roads, it would be difficult to understand the enthusiastic greeting the feat was greeted with in Los Angeles. They passed two cars making the same trip on the way. Shortly after arriving in Southern California, Dr. Keller purchased nine acres at Yorba Linda, where he started an avocado grove, which he called the AZTEC grove after the original growers of the fruit. His interest in the industry was very keen and with characteristic enthusiasm he threw himself into the work of educating the public to know this new fruit.

In 1918 he was elected a Director of the Association for a three year term ending in 1921. During that time he managed the first commercial avocado show which was held in connection with the First Valencia Orange Show. Later Dr. and Mrs. Keller did a noteworthy job of education at the Liberty Fair held in Los Angeles during the war. They manned the exhibit during the period of the Fair and from fruit from their own grove and

some other growers donated, passed out ten thousand samples of avocados to the people in attendance, most of whom had never tasted an avocado before. During the later years of his life at Santa Monica, he presented an avocado program each year for the Santa Monica Woman's Club and acted as consultant for the problems of the great number of dooryard growers in that district.

Lester E. Keller was born on a farm near Cadmus, Ohio, on February 25, 1859. His father was a raiser of fine blooded horses and a man of the David Harum type. It was from him that the Doctor inherited his love of horses and that dry humor that made him beloved by all who knew him well.

His early schooling was in Gallipolis, Ohio, and his medical education was at the Ohio College of Medicine. He was graduated in 1883 and in the same year married Mary L. Allen of Ironton who died in Santa Ana in 1920.

He first practiced in Gallipolis, but shortly afterwards moved to the coal mining region of New River in West Virginia. During this period he served a term in the West Virginia Legislature. Subsequently he moved to Ironton, Ohio, where he became an outstanding surgeon and established his own hospital, being surgeon for the B. & O. and Cincinnati and Ohio Railroads also.

Dr. Keller was always a crusader for righteous causes and his most outstanding accomplishment in Ironton was securing a pure water supply for the city. This, he succeeded in doing against the strenuous opposition of local politicians by finally appealing to the governor. Thus one more American city was freed from typhoid. Dr. Keller always fought hard, but fairly and with his ever present humor was respected by his enemies and loved by his friends.

Dr. Keller married Lucille May Christofferson in 1925. In 1926, due to oil development on his property and failing health he removed to Santa Monica where he passed on November 30, 1931, leaving his beloved garden and avocado trees for Mrs. Keller to enjoy.

During his Yorba Linda residence he was President of the First National Bank and of the Associated Chambers of Commerce of Orange County. Illustrative of the humor that enlivened many an avocado meeting and endeared him to all the earlier growers are the stories that Dr. Keller always insisted were responsible for his election as head of the Associated Chambers. Dr. Keller related them as follows:

"I have the skin of a very fine diamond back rattler on my wall in the dining room, which I caught alive with a noose on the end of a fishing pole. We kept it around the house and it became quite a pet. One night we heard a commotion in the bedroom and on investigation found a burglar had broken in, but the snake had him fast, wound around the bedpost and his tail out the window, rattling for a policeman."

The gentleman who introduced him said: "I'll never ask you for another story as long as I live, Keller. You're the biggest liar in Southern California." Then the doctor came across with this one:

"One morning not long ago, when I went up the hill to dig around my avocado trees, I found a gopher snake, stiff with the cold. I brought him down to the house and threw him under the heater to thaw out. Of course, he was grateful and became a great pet.

Yesterday when we had one of our **unusual** thunder and lightning storms, we missed him. I happened to go outdoors and there he was on top of the house, on his nose with his tail in the air acting as a lightning rod." While the crowd roared with laughter, Doctor Keller stood with a perfectly sober face and assured them of the truth of this story.

Having known him so well, I am quite certain that the Doctor would have wanted any account of his life to end with such a laugh as these stories bring to us.

CARTER BARRETT.