

## Honoring the Parent Tree of the Fuerte Avocado

### *"Sowing Seeds of Kindness"*

**Dr. H. J. Webber**

*University of California Citrus Experiment Station, Riverside*

(Talk given at the annual dinner, May 21, 1938, San Diego)

Others more able than I have described many of the details of the pilgrimage to Mexico to honor the parent tree of our great Fuerte avocado. I am expected to describe the ceremonies at Atlixco and their apparent effects. At Atlixco, as elsewhere in our pilgrimage, the wise planning, largely creditable to Dr. J. Eliot Coit of the organization committee, was plainly evident in the success of the undertaking.

Our party, preceding the ceremony, had spent a day and night at Puebla. Here, Judge Halm called on Governor Camacho and others, fulfilling the diplomatic demands of the occasion. During that day, Barrett, Horne, Miss Gallegos, and I took the time to make a special trip to Atlixco and to the old tree to make sure everything was in readiness (Shamel and Popenoe had been officially charged with this duty) and to get photographs.

### **ATLIXCO STAGES HOLIDAY**

We found the little city of Atlixco in a bustle. An army of men were engaged in cleaning up the streets, washing and scrubbing. Posters were displayed in public places, officially issued by the Mayor and Council of the City, describing the purpose of our trip and calling on all the people to welcome us and join in the celebration. The citizens were also urged to clean up their places so the city would present a holiday appearance.

An archway of welcome had been erected at the entrance to the city; and arched streamers of red, white, and blue and green bunting were placed over the street about every forty feet from this entrance arch to the City Palace (Palacio Municipal), and thence to the entrance of the residence of Senor Le Blanc and the old tree, a distance of about one mile. We four lunched that day in the California Cafe and found that even there they had special cards of welcome printed. There was nothing Californian about this restaurant but the name, however. We had a good lunch and some good cold Mictizuma beer which was most welcome, as we hesitated to trust the water and it was a warm day. The Mayor had sent Senor Soils, the town recorder and historian, to accompany our party around and we invited him to lunch with us. But when we came to pay, there was no bill. The Senor had made us his guests. I tried to express our thanks—"Muchas gracias, Señor"—but couldn't think of gracias. What I said was, Muchas merci, Monsieur; but realizing that we didn't need any mercy I limited it to, "Oh fiddlesticks, we're much obliged." I'm sure he understood, as he was an understanding

man.

### **CALIFORNIANS MAKE READY**

That evening the Judge had made two engagements for the party. They were diplomatic engagements: one, to attend the opening and dedication ceremonies of the immense new Municipal Natatorium of Puebla; the other, later, to attend an official Red Cross Ball sponsored by his Excellency, the Governor, and Mrs. Camacho. We of course made up a gift fund which we placed in charge of Judge Halm, to be delivered. Perhaps you have heard of the Chinese using a wheelbarrow to carry their coins. Well, with all the silver the Judge got, bulging his pockets, I thought of the fabled wheelbarrow.

The dedication of the Natatorium with its tremendous crowd was a grand scramble over legs and even bodies, but we finally got in, and out again at about 11 o'clock with only one casualty. One lady received a severely sprained ankle. Then we went to the Ball, which, to the younger members of our party, Mr. and Mrs. Griswold for instance, was I believe considered the outstanding feature of the pilgrimage. There were considerable gold braid, fine clothes, and many beautiful señoritas. Remembering Mrs. Horne's injunction, I watched Professor Horne rather closely; then I watched Judge Halm with his pockets weighted down with silver, among which was one (or was it five) of my pesos. So much dinero! I was worried and constituted myself a committee to watch the Judge. Finally, with Horne's help as a translator, the Judge found the correct party to receive the money and we older individuals departed. The young folks, I understand, didn't get away until the wee hours of the morning.

### **WE START BUT ARE HALTED AT GATES**

Rested by a late sleep, we left for Atlixco the next morning about 10:30 for the culminating ceremony of our trip. It was a beautiful, balmy Easter Sunday morning, and we had a refreshing drive of some seven miles. Our cavalcade of ten autos was halted by a big crowd at the Welcome Arch to the city. Strains of beautiful Mexican music floated through the air as we piled out of the autos and rushed forward to see what was taking place. First we were drawn up and photographed, then we were re-photographed, after which we were drawn down and photographed. Facing us in the middle of the entrance stood the Mayor of the city, Señor Gabriel Cuevas, surrounded by the city officials and a great crowd of people.

### **WE GET KEY TO CITY**

Here, the Mayor made a speech of welcome which was responded to with dignified courtesy by our leader, Judge Halm. Both speeches were translated into the opposite language by one of our party, Señor Servin, representative of the Mexican National Railways, who accompanied us throughout our journeys in Mexico. Then the Mayor presented to our leader a great silver master key to the city, 12 inches long, reposing in a velvet case—a fine souvenir of the occasion. The cameras clicked again.

## **A KINDLY BUT TRIUMPHAL ENTRY**

Then, led by the band and the city officials we swung into an irregular column and marched into town to the Palacio Municipal (Municipal Palace). Our way was along flag and bunting-bedecked streets and under the red, white, and blue and green strands arched over the street. The way on either side was flanked by school children in uniforms, girls and boys alternating, the girls' waists decorated with red, white and blue. Back of the children crowds filled the sidewalk. Halm had handed me his hat when he spoke at the arch, and I still carried it. I was worried for fear the sun might be too hot for him and so hurried along trying to get an opportunity to hand it to him. I was reminded of old General Blucher's pipe master at the Battle of Waterloo, who nearly went insane rushing here and there trying to keep a pipe always filled and ready lighted for the General when he wanted it. Only in this case, I had the pipe and made use of it as best I could, carrying two hats. I was glad they weren't Mexican sombreros.

As we walked along, everyone was smiling and happy. All was informal. The crowd fell in behind and followed us,

## **PERSONAL SCROLLS OF WELCOME PRESENTED**

Arriving at the Palacio Municipal we were ushered up to the second floor into a series of reception rooms facing the main plaza of the city. Here, as our names were called, we were each presented with hand-lettered parchment scrolls welcoming us to the city and the celebration. These scrolls were signed by each of the dozen or so members of the Council. Think of it—these were individual scrolls with our own individual names, not stereotyped machine-made scrolls. They are our most valuable souvenirs and I already have mine framed.

## **WE REVIEW PARADE**

Next we were escorted to the balcony of the Palace to review the parade of the school children. Hundreds of them in uniform marched past led by the band. They carried Mexican flags with a sprinkling of United States colors, and from a balcony not far from us a comparatively large, evidently home-made, U. S. flag proudly waved in the breeze.

## **FRATERNIZING WITH THE PEOPLE**

There was now a wait of about an hour of which some took advantage to get a light lunch at the California Cafe. Certainly some liquid refreshment was very desirable. The time was spent mainly in mingling with the people who milled back and forth filling the plaza. Judge Halm walked proudly about among the people saluting and exhibiting the key. He was the center of attraction so far as I observed and he got away with it very well. All of us were busy greeting parties and exhibiting our badges. Horne could hardly tear himself away from some of the señoritas with whom he was making conversation. But finally the whistle was blown and we hurried to the autos and were taken to the home of Senor Le Blanc, before which a platoon of infantry was drawn up to lend dignity to the occasion. We dismounted from the autos and were ushered into the patio behind

the residence, an open space in this case approximately 100 feet square, an ungrassed backyard with trees and shrubs scattered irregularly here and there. Here in one corner was our parent Fuerte tree and under its wide spreading branches on one side were chairs for those taking part in the ceremony. A large table stood in front of them. Immediately before the tree was the monument encircled and backed by the flags and emblems of Mexico and of the United States.

## **THE CEREMONY**

The band played martial music as we marched in and were ushered to a group of seats immediately in front which had been reserved for our party. Finally we got placed and were able to observe what was happening. The patio rapidly filled with people who were permitted to enter after our party came in. The housetops and fences all around were black with people at every vantage point commanding a view. The participating officials were soon in place, every space filled, awaiting the opening of the ceremony. Judge Halm arose and with simple but commanding dignity called the meeting to order. It was a plain but glorified setting, out-of-doors under the trees facing the Great Avocado, the mother of our California industry; and the officials gathered to do it honor. The murmur of the many voices died away and an almost absolute hush fell on the audience. I could hear the rustle of the leaves above my head and felt a thrill of expectancy creep up my spine as if tensing for action. Then the Judge spoke slowly and deliberately in keeping with the time and place. He described the purpose of our mission to Atlixco and expressed in appropriate phrases the great satisfaction we all felt for the kindly, sympathetic spirit in which we had been received and for the honor shown to us and to our country.

Following this speech the various speakers were introduced. From the United States, short talks were made by Judge F. D. Halm, officially representing the California Avocado Association and appointed delegate of the State of California; Mr. A. D. Shamel, representing the U. S. Department of Agriculture; Mr. Wilson Popenoe, introducer into the United States of many avocado varieties; and Consul-General James B. Stewart, of the American Embassy in Mexico City, representing Ambassador Josephus Daniels. Representing Mexico, the speakers were Governor Maximino Camacho of the State of Puebla; Dr. Jose Parres, Mexico's Secretary of Agriculture, and Ernesto Hidalgo, Secretary to Mexico's Minister of Foreign Affairs. Important officials occupying seats of honor included General Gomez, Chief of the Army in Puebla, Mayor Gazman of Puebla, Mayor Cuevas of Atlixco, and others.

## **THE MONUMENT UNVEILED**

The bronze tablet bears the following historical statement, in both Spanish and English:

"This tree has, through its progeny, played a major role in the development of a new industry in California, United States of America.

"In testimony of our gratitude and appreciation, this tablet is placed here by the California Avocado Association, 1938."

The marker was unveiled by Judge Halm and Governor Camacho, one on either side of the monument, each raising the veiling flag of his own country. They then shook hands in a friendly way, typifying the friendship and goodwill of our respective countries. The band struck up the Mexican national air and the cameras clicked.

### **GOLD MEDAL TO SEÑOR LE BLANC**

Following the unveiling, gold medals of appreciation were bestowed upon Señor Alejandro Le Blanc, owner of the old tree who had so kindly permitted buds to be freely taken from it; and upon Mr. Carl Schmidt, who was first to recognize the value of the variety and who first cut and forwarded the budwood to California.

The presentation addresses on behalf of the Avocado Association were made very graciously by Professor William T. Horne of the University of California Citrus Experiment Station, speaking **lentamente y con claridad** (slowly and distinctly) in Spanish. The fine gold medal awarded to Senor Le Blanc was handed to Governor Camacho, who in turn pinned it on the breast of the proud recipient with a few appreciative expressions relative to the great service he had rendered. The medal of appreciation awarded to Mr. Carl Schmidt was handed to the manly young son of Señor Le Blanc who carried it graciously to Mr. Schmidt. Each medal recipient responded to Professor Horne's presentation with heartfelt words of appreciation.

Following this ceremony we were conducted a few blocks on foot to a beautiful private garden, where under the shade of great tropical trees all visiting guests were served with dinner. And such a dinner—12 courses, or was it 15; all sorts of Mexican and American dishes washed down with pulque, tequila cocktails, wine and beer. I got Horne down at the table beside me as I had observed that when he was under surveillance he never fell for these weaknesses. Personally, I can testify that the food was fine, as was the pulque, the cocktails, and of course the beer. It's not beer down there, but **cerveza**, so we won't count that. Before the dinner, members of our party were all in. After the dinner, one good eater was heard to remark that he wouldn't take a thousand dollars for that experience. Well, perhaps he had taken more than one cocktail, but those were my sentiments also. Some of us did feel mighty fine—why?

### **WE LEAVE ATLIXCO AND GET A PAINTING**

We excused ourselves as soon as we could, said our adieus fervently to those nearest us, and literally amid the cheers of thousands of onlookers struggled to our autos and were driven away. We were scheduled to reach Mexico City that night, a hundred miles away, over a 10,000-foot pass, and the sun was already low.

As our drivers started their cars, the crowd opened up and we gained speed. At the first corner, however, we heard some woman scream and the crowd surged out toward our motor until our driver was forced to stop. A young woman, evidently under excitement, crowded up to our car and presented to Judge Halm a fine painting of the **Mother Fuerte Tree**, on which the colors were not yet dry. It evidently had been finished but a few minutes before. The Judge thanked the young woman, accepting the painting for the Association, and our driver hurried us along. All was over, but we still had the

beautiful drive to Mexico City, circling around old Popocatepetl, which soon was blotted out by the encircling gloom of night. Then came Mexico City, the brilliant lights, a good bed at the Hotel Geneve, the end of a perfect day. (Painting reproduced on page 62.)

### **WHAT DID IT ACCOMPLISH?**

The pilgrimage was richly worthwhile for those who participated, even if nothing else were gained; but this was only of secondary value in comparison with the wholesome international influence exerted. For fifteen days, forty of our people were hurried from one part of Mexico to another, meeting, greeting, and smiling into the faces of thousands. Our mission of friendliness was impressed upon each member of our party and all were thrilled to be privileged to do their part.

Wherein was this influence exerted? Through the exchange of friendly looks and smiles; the sympathetic touch of hand in greeting; the kindly sentiments of respect and confidence expressed; the exchange of a few words in a common language; the discovery of mutual interests and of like thinking; the lesson of the selection and propagation of superior specimens and its value to agriculture; the commingling and fraternizing together in honoring one of Mexico's great productions, the Fuerte Avocado, and our desire to give honor where honor was deserved; the recognition by thousands, of our very evident admiration for their national monuments, national treasures, and national civilization.

All of these things throughout our pilgrimage to a dozen important cities affected and influenced directly the thoughts and feelings of many thousands. The widespread publicity given to our trip and its purpose has certainly influenced indirectly many more thousands. This Association made a great contribution of inestimable value toward the peace and goodwill of nations.