

Reminiscences of Early Avocado Introductions*

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Excerpts from the 1938 Proceedings of the Florida State Horticultural Society.

Thirty different varieties of avocados in boxes—all budded sorts—filled the slathouse in 1912. This was eleven years after Geo. B. Celson first budded the Trapp avocado and put it, the very first budded variety of avocado, on the market, and the first boom of this new fruit crop was on in Florida, where it started some years earlier than in California. The 70-year-old pioneer of Miami Beach, Mr. Collins of New Jersey, had set out over 100 acres of avocados, mostly budded Trapps, and this was then one of the largest plantings of budded avocado trees in the world. Owing to the uncongenial character of the shell-soils of the beach and the salt breezes that constantly blew across that area, the trees failed to fruit and the venture was a complete failure. In the garden on Brickell Avenue three avocado trees from Guatemala were standing: the Colla and Collins, sent by G. N. Collins from Guatemala in 1906, and the Winslow, presented by Consul General Winslow of Guatemala City. These were six years old from seed but I see no mention in my 1912 report of their having yet fruited. I recall being much disappointed not to see in the collection the hardy Chilean avocado of which I had sent a large box of seeds from Santiago in 1899.

PRESENTS MEYER MEDAL TO C. P. TAFT

It was not until 1919 that I found this variety growing on the place of C. P. Taft in Orange, California, and he told me it was the first avocado seed he had ever planted. Later I had the pleasure of presenting Taft with the Meyer Medal for his distinguished work on the pioneering of the avocado in California, in which the seed of a fruit he bought in the market played the chief part.

The Colla, Collins and Winslow trees in the little garden began to attract attention soon after my visit in 1912 because of their seedlings. These turned out to be hybrids with the West Indian race, and we were obliged to hunt names for them that would show their parentage. The Collason, Collinson and Winslowson were the first seedlings to come from these trees, and who would say that these have not played something of a role in the avocado business of South Florida. The freezes and hurricanes and factors of the commercial market demand have eliminated them from many orchards, but nevertheless they were eye openers because of their hybrid character and the fact that they were superb tasting varieties and matured in the fall or winter.

I look back to those early days of the great avocado industry with pleasure for they were days of excitement and surprise, and while we may not have appreciated quite fully the importance of the events taking place around us, for no young people do, we certainly were active in our search for avocados that would do well here.

Two years after this visit Wilson Popenoe, who had joined our research staff, came on the scene in Florida and introduced a collection of the varieties which by this time had come into prominence in California, such as the Taft, Dickinson, Meserve, Solano, Blakeman, Ganter, and Harman and the now famous Fuerte which his father's West India Gardens at Altadena, California, had introduced in 1911 from Atlixco, Mexico. Great were our expectations for there had been some unparalleled publicity connected with the furor over such varieties as the Harman and the Taft, etc. But, alas, it soon was evident that not one of the varieties which had done so well in California was happy in South Florida, where the summers are rainy and the soil is surcharged with lime.

Popenoe was sent to Cuba for the best Cuban sorts but these seem all to have faded from our collections. Then, in the fall of 1915, at the meeting of the California Avocado Association, Dr. H. J. Webber introduced a motion to the effect that the Association should petition the Secretary of Agriculture to send an explorer to Guatemala to search for the best varieties of avocado to be found there. We chose Wilson Popenoe for this work and from September 1916, until mid-December, 1917, he was actively searching for promising seedlings through the lowlands and highlands of Guatemala.

POPENOE EXPLORES GUATEMALA

In preparation for the receipt of the budwood which it was expected he would send in, Edward Simmonds planted seedlings of the Collins tree in the garden at Buena Vista which I shall refer to later. He did this because they showed unusual vigor of growth and he thought they would prove a suitable and uniform stock into which to bud. In October the budsticks began to arrive and one after another he saved them; to insure the getting of the budwood from the same trees again should he fail. Popenoe cut his field serial numbers into the bark of the trees so that there could be no mistake in identification. Thanks to the skill shown by Ed Simmonds and by Ed Goucher, who also budded many of the same varieties in the greenhouse in Washington, nearly every one of Popenoe's thirty Guatemalan sorts was saved and at least a preliminary test of each was made. Unfortunately, the stock chosen did not prove congenial at all to some of the sorts, although it did to others. I have a set of photographs of the unions made by these imported buds on the Collins seedling stock. It was apparent from the very start that certain ones, for some reason unknown to us, were not adapted to Florida conditions. While this series was being tried here, a similar series was made in California.

Wilson Popenoe's explorations of Central America after avocados deserve to go down into history as one of the most thorough pieces of horticultural plant hunting work ever carried out, for he not merely secured seeds, which is a comparatively easy thing to do, but successfully landed here thousands of scions in such a condition that their buds could be budded into stocks waiting for them in Florida and California. This was long before the days of air mail.

So much interest was aroused by his work and the new avocado industry came on so fast in Florida and California that in 1920 he was sent to Costa Rica to explore that country for superior avocado seedlings. From there he went down into Ecuador, to the noted Chota Valley, and as a result we had for trial varieties from both those countries. The Ecuadoreans disappointed us, as did also most of the Costa Ricans, but one of

these which Popenoe called the Alfaro, S. P. I. 50680, has on The Kampong at least turned out to be a promising dwarf sort which may later be heard from, I think.

ORIGIN OF MAYAN NAMES FOR AVOCADOS

He had given serial numbers to his collections but as I had been dealing with S. P. I. numbers until I was tired of them, I asked him when he got back why he could not give the various sorts Mayan names which we could publish in the inventories which were then going through the press. He returned in a few hours with the most amazing lot of easily pronounceable Mayan names imaginable and these names the varieties bear today. This procedure was in strong contrast with the methods of some of those unimaginative persons who would discard the charming Arabic names of the date varieties which we sent in from Algeria, Egypt, and Arabia, attached to our collections of offshoots, and substitute high-sounding English names.

Today it is perhaps the Itzamna variety of Popenoe which has proven the best of the lot in Florida because of its unusual hardiness and lateness. (This is 55736 of the printed inventories and not 43486, which failed to live and is now only one of the many dead numbers which are to be found in the inventories.)

Whether "ultimately," as we so foolishly are inclined to say, one of the direct introductions of avocados from Central America or Mexico will prove to be the great commercial variety here, who is wise enough to say? More probably it may be from the hybrids of some of them that the local sorts will come on which the grove owners will depend. Curiously enough, the Collinson, that still holds its own in some quarters, originated as one of the stock seedlings upon which Ed Simmonds budded one of the Popenoe importations at Buena Vista Garden in 1916. Mr. Simmonds used to relate how it was blown over by a windstorm and how he asked the old colored man, Stafford, why he hadn't staked it up properly. In a slovenly way he had put up against it a board with a knot hole at the end and the sharp edge of the board had torn the bark off. Simmonds scolded him for such carelessness. To this he replied, "I was going to dig it up and throw it away. Any tree that blows over is no good anyhow." Shortly after this Stafford had a dream in which Simmonds appeared and it so frightened him that he quit his job and never returned.