

Avocado Reminiscences

SOME EGOTISTICAL NOTES BY A TROPICAL TRAMP

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My first interest in avocados came when I went to work for D. W. Coolidge at his Rare Plant Gardens in Pasadena, in 1908, while I was still in high school. Coolidge's nursery was quite small at that time, located on Mentor Ave. Later I helped with his moving to the new and better location at corner of Hill and Colorado Sts. This, at present, is the site of the Pasadena branch library, and many of the old avocado trees and other ornaments now gracing the grounds about that building are remnants of that planting.

At high school I first met Wilson Popenoe and there began a most intimate friendship which has extended down through the intervening years. Mr. Coolidge was responsible for my introduction to many interesting subtropical and tropical fruits and ornamentals. He showed me my first avocado (a Blake I believe), also my first cherimoya, white sapote, feijoa, carissa, guava, and many others. He was the one who taught me how to bud and graft, and gave me my first experience in lighting orchard heaters for frost prevention there. Mr. Coolidge's infectious enthusiasm about all sorts of new plants was a lively stimulation to a youngster for whom a world of new and little known plant forms was unfolding.

This was the time when many of the early new avocado varieties were first coming into bearing as seedlings of unknown and untested value. Each season brought unexpected surprises such as Murrieta Green, Colorado, Dickey, Habersham, Meserve, Clower, Dickinson, Lyon, Spinks, Miller, and many other of the thick skinned Guatemalan group. Of the thin skinned Mexicans, the Blake, White, Harmon, Ganter, and the old Chapellow were the vogue.

One of the most important influences in increasing interest in the avocado was the Pasadena Horticultural Society. Long before the California Avocado Society was organized in 1915, the Pasadena Society was holding autumn and spring shows, usually at the old Maryland Hotel or on its adjoining tennis court, over which a large tent was erected. Here were brought together many avocado pioneers and budding enthusiasts who competed for the prizes and argued over the comparative value of varieties.

Here came Dr. E. O. Franceschi (Fenzi) of Santa Barbara and his son Cammillo with their collections of new plants of all kinds. They did much to stimulate the interest in avocados in the Santa Barbara area. "Cam." Fenzi, Wilt. Popenoe and I enjoyed many an avocado and subtropical fruit jaunt together in the years that followed. I owe much to the endless enthusiasm of Dr. Fenzi and his eager willingness to share new plant lore.

At these horticultural exhibits I first became acquainted with Will Hertrich who was one

of the first to plant avocados in the Pasadena area, and was and is one of the closest observers and students of the avocado and its adaptation to Southern California conditions. The Huntington Botanic Garden, of which he is the builder and Director, was a constant source of help and information in those early days. Hertrich was ever ready to drop whatever he was doing and take time out to go over plantings with us young chaps and give us the benefit of his years of plant work—and he still is. Ernest Branton was another feature of those early exhibitions. Here E. E. Knight, Dan Clower, and A. R. Rideout exhibited fruits and discussed varieties with much hope and eagerness. We were all looking for the ideal variety which could form the basis of a commercial industry in California—and we are still looking, however much progress may have been made.



University of California Summer Traveling Class in Citriculture, July 1913, at West India Gardens, Altadena, Calif. Back row, right to left: Mr. F. O. Popenoe, T. U. Barber, Victor Newlin, Modesto Queroga, Dr. I. J. Condit, H. S. Sykes, Carl Nichols, Warren Towt, M. V. Hubbard, C. A. Rankin, Bob Ralston. Front row, right to left: Dr. J. Elliot Coit, Knowles A. Ryerson, C. W. Hartranft, Lewis H. Moore, I. G. Cockcroft.

By the time high school was finished the West India Gardens were being established in Altadena by Wilson's father, F. O. Popenoe, and his associates. Before going to college as well as during vacations of that period, I was fortunate to have worked there. Those were days of constant thrill and excitement, for the Garden's explorers in Mexico were sending up fruit samples and budwood of avocados as well as seeds and fruits of other interesting plants. There were large and delicious cherimoyas, sapotes—white, black, prieto, and chico, as well as guavas and mangoes. The avocado bud-wood came in numbered, and two of these shipments were to prove of great commercial importance right up to now—No. 13 the Puebla and No. 15 the Fuerte. The latter was so named because of its early vigorous growth in the nursery. Both were sent up by Carl Schmidt. At that time, too, Paul Popenoe, Wilson's brother, was beginning his studies of the date palm. Later Wilson joined him in his first extended plant exploration trip through the commercial date producing regions of the old world. Soon an extensive collection of date fruits of many varieties searched for began to come in to add another interest to

work at West India Gardens. It was while working there that I first met Carter Barrett when he came out from Kansas to work with us and make his first acquaintance with the avocado. We packed the avocado and loquat nursery trees for the very first planting in the Vista area. Elmer Aul was also working there at the time, he later becoming manager of the Loleta Armour estate at Santa Barbara where he planted an avocado orchard of the Taft variety which has been quite successful. Also Ralph Cornell was a fellow worker there in those days, as was also T. U. Barber, a member of the firm.

The West India Gardens was a veritable training school in subtropical horticulture for a number of us. It brought us in contact with many of the pioneering souls of the period. C. P. Taft of Orange, whose avocado, loquat, persimmon, and feijoa plantings were always open to study and the collection of specimens at any time, gave us young chaps free rein on his historic ranch. It was indeed an honor and great pleasure many years later to present him with the Frank Meyer Memorial Medal on behalf of the American Genetic Association for distinguished work in plant introduction and improvement. At that time Mr. Thos. H. Shedden of Monrovia, Chas. D. Adams of Upland, and J. M. Elliott of Puente were beginning their avocado plantings and studies. They all were frequent visitors to West India Gardens. These men were to exert a great influence on the industry in the years ahead.

Professor C. P. Baker of Pomona College was an inspiration to many plantsmen and entomologists who were his students at that time. I had intended to continue my studies under him, and his resignation to accept a position in the Philippines was a keen disappointment. Entry at the University of California at Berkeley followed. In the midst of my course there Dr. J. Eliot Coit came, being transferred from the Citrus Experiment Station at Riverside with instruction to establish a Division of Citriculture (now renamed Subtropical Pomology). I was a member of his first class along with Robert W. Hodgson. My association with Bob in this field dates from that period, and has continued over a long period of years, much to my pleasure and satisfaction.

During my college days, encouraged by Baker and Popenoe, I published descriptions of newly introduced foreign varieties of avocados in the Pomona Journal of Economic Botany; and of domestic varieties later in the University of California Journal of Agriculture. Professor Wm. T. Horne's interest in the diseases of the avocado drew him into the rapidly growing field, and Professor Ira J. Condit came to Berkeley as assistant to Dr. Coit. Condit has continued his interest in this field all the years since. We are greatly indebted to him for keeping the check-list of varieties up to date year after year, and for settling questions of dates and places as the years dim memories.

After the interruption of World War I, I finally got back into subtropical fruit work as assistant Farm Advisor in Los Angeles County, and specialized on avocados under Hodgson, succeeding him as Farm Advisor when he later returned to Berkeley to head the Division of Subtropical Horticulture. Under Hodgson's leadership, a program of field trials and studies concerning avocado production was developed. During this period the California Avocado Society was working out its marketing plans, and when George Hodgkin was employed as first manager, I well remember helping him pack the first shipments ever made by the California Avocado Growers' Exchange, as Calavo was known at that time. That was out on East 7th St., in the old freight shed along the Salt Lake Railroad tracks, in striking contrast to the modern facilities which have developed

since.

At about this time Dr. A. B. Stout of the New York Botanic Gardens came to Pomona College intending to investigate citrus flowers. I believe it was through talks he had with Hodgson and myself that he was induced to turn his attention to avocado flowers instead. We helped him get started in that work, the interesting results of which were published in the Yearbooks of the California Avocado Society.

During this period, as chairman of the Avocado Society Variety Committee with T. G. (Goudy) Southerland and Roy K. Cole, I became greatly indebted to Carl Newman. He was always so helpful, keen, observing, on his toes all the time, and always willing to take time off from his heavy duties to help us with the variety work. I am gratified to learn that recently an improved strain of Fuerte which he selected and brought to prominence has been named for him. Those were really days to remember—some of the most pleasant of all my time spent as an extension worker. The reports of the variety committee at the annual meetings were always lively sessions.



At the U.S. Plant Introduction Gardens at Cocoanut Grove, Florida, David Fairchild instructs Dr. J. Eliot Coit with respect to the proper way to drink the milk from a green cocoanut. Photo by Knowles Ryerson.

In 1925 I went to Haiti as Horticulturist of the Service Technique there, remaining until 1928. There the avocado was studied along with other fruits. The avocados were all of West Indian race and nothing to brag about. Improved varieties were introduced from

both California and Florida, and cultural trials started. At this time the opportunity came to survey the avocados in Santo Domingo and in Cuba. Years later similar studies in Puerto Rico were carried out.

In 1927, as Horticulturist on a special mission headed by Dr. Elwood Mead, several months were spent in Palestine and adjoining territory studying horticultural problems, among them the early efforts to establish avocado culture in Palestine. For several years, as head of the Division of Foreign Plant Introduction, interest was maintained in the avocado. During an expedition to North Africa and neighboring Mediterranean regions I was able to study the beginnings of avocado culture in those countries. Later during two years while in charge of subtropical and tropical fruit investigations of the U.S. Bureau of Plant Industry, including all work by the Bureau on avocados in Florida, Texas, and California, studies on this fruit were continued.

When in Mexico in 1943, as delegate to the Pan-American Agricultural Congress, I had the unparalleled opportunity of going over the avocado groves of the Atlixco and Puebla areas in company with my old friend Wilson Popenoe and Helen Popenoe and Carl Schmidt who discovered the original Fuerte tree. Our visit to this famous tree was described by Wilson Popenoe in the Yearbook for 1942. This visit confirmed our views, long held by Wilson and myself, that there remains a very important job of exploration yet to be done in this and other parts of Mexico for varieties of the Fuerte type. It is more than 30 years since the Fuerte tree was found in Atlixco. Hundreds, if not thousands of new seedlings of this type have since come into bearing. Budwood of two of these which appeared promising, I brought back with me and turned over to Bob Hodgson who has succeeded in making them grow at West Los Angeles. When peace again permits, this study should not be overlooked by California avocado growers. It is one that Wilt Popenoe and I have an ambition to make ourselves if we can.

At present while on leave from the University of California, working for the office of Economic Warfare of the Government, as special representative in the South Pacific area, has permitted my seeing something of avocado production in Tahiti, Samoa, Fiji, New Caledonia, Australia and other places. I was especially pleased to have an opportunity to visit with Mr. Harrison Smith at Tahiti and see his splendid gardens with the many introduced plants he has brought there within the last twenty-five years. Smith is interested in avocados and has paid especial attention to them.