

THE FUERTE AVOCADO IN YORBA LINDA

George Kellogg

Yorba Linda, California

The Yorba Linda area should be nearly as interested in the Fuerte avocado history as in the fact that the present President of the United States was born here, for this area has the honor of having the first Fuerte avocado orchard in the world.

The word Fuerte means *hardy* and has been named such because we have found that it withstands cold weather better than most, if not all avocado varieties. There have been hundreds of avocado varieties that have fallen by the wayside.

The history of the Fuerte dates from the summer of 1911 when Carl Schmidt, of Mexico City, was employed by Mr. Popenoe, of the West India Gardens of Altadena, to search out the better avocado fruits on the various markets of the avocado growing portions of Mexico, then trace the fruits to the trees from which they came and send buds from those trees to the West India Gardens.

The result was that he sent up many buds in 1911, some of which were marked number 15, taken from a tree in the yard of a Mr. Blanco at Atlisco, Mexico, about 120 miles southeast of Mexico City. These buds were inserted in small seedling avocado trees at the West India Gardens and were the only avocado trees not frosted by the cold weather in January, 1913.

For a period of nearly three weeks this was the coldest weather ever experienced in the citrus growing area of Southern California. The thermometer went down to 12 degrees above zero (freezing water is 32 degrees) around Pomona and practically ruined and killed many of the orange groves there — the center of the citrus production at that time.

All the avocado trees in Southern California were frozen with the exception of the number 15, whereupon they were named Fuerte.

Mr. John T. Whedon, who had purchased five acres of land in Yorba Linda, about 1½ miles north and west of the townsite, had become interested in the avocado and visited the West India Gardens in the summer of 1912. He ordered approximately 40 of the well known varieties of that time and paid his money down for them, saying that he would be back for them in the spring and plant them on his small ranch near Yorba Linda.

Promptly in March, 1913, he appeared at the West India Gardens in Altadena, driving a white horse with a light spring wagon, to obtain his trees that he had ordered. Mr. Popenoe told him that the extremely cold weather of January last had killed all the varieties of avocados that he had ordered, but that he had a few that had withstood the cold weather and had been called the Fuerte because of that fact. Mr. Whedon could have them in the place of those he had ordered.

However, Mr. Whedon was not inclined to take a variety of avocados of which he knew nothing about arid demanded his money back. Mr. Popenoe very patiently told him that the freeze of last January had caused a loss to the Gardens of approximately \$100,000.00 and he was not in a position to pay back the money, especially so because he would guarantee that the number 15 or Fuerte would be as good or better than the varieties that were ordered.

Much against his will, Mr. Whedon took the 40 Fuerte trees, rather than start a lawsuit, and drove back to Yorba Linda, where he planted the first Fuerte Avocado orchard in the world, although he didn't realize it at that time. His place was at an altitude sufficient to overlook nearly all of Yorba Linda Tract.

In 1922 there was another cold spell, not quite as bad as the 1913 freeze, although practically all the avocado varieties except Mr. Whedon's Fuertes were again frozen.

Thus, the name Fuerte was justified, ie, hardy; and as such became the most sought after and desirable of all varieties of avocados at that time.

Because of the fact that I had traded with Mr. Whedon and knew him well, I had the privilege of introducing him to the members of Yorba Linda Lodge No. 469, Free and Accepted Masons, several years later, when he was presented with a 50-year-pin of the Masonic fraternity. As we sat upon the rostrum, while the members assembled for the meeting, he said to me, "When I drove that spring wagon and the old white horse and those trees back from Altadena to my place in Yorba Linda that day in 1913, I cussed most of the way home because I could not get my money back. But I was wrong. The Fuerte has done pretty well by me. Several years in succession I have sold as much as \$6,000.00 worth of buds from those trees and I had orders from hotels in Los Angeles and San Francisco for all the Fuerte avocados I could ship them at \$12.00 per dozen."

Nearly one half of the avocados grown in California today are from buds of descendents of those buds taken from the Whedon grove in Yorba Linda. Some Fuerte trees have been shipped as far away as Palestine and as a member of the California Avocado Society we composed a group that took Fuerte avocado trees to plant in the Governors Palace yard in Mexico City as well as at the Blanco home in Atlisco, where a copper plaque had been installed at the base of the old tree, designating it as a National Monument to the "Mother" tree of the Fuerte variety.