

Knowles Ryerson - In Memoriam

Knowles Augustus Ryerson, horticulturist and an early exponent of the California avocado industry, died in January, 1990. His passing took from the industry the last of the real pioneers who participated in the industry's early struggles to find its place and who aided in the formation of the industry's first organized marketing agency, the California Avocado Growers Exchange.

Knowles Ryerson was born in Seattle, October 17, 1892. His boyhood was spent in Pasadena, California, where he attended grade and high schools. A fellow high school student was Wilson Popenoe, with whom he developed a lifelong friendship.

Knowles's interest in avocados began, he has said, when still in high school he went to work for pioneer avocado nurseryman D. M. Coolidge at his Rare Plant Gardens, in Pasadena. An attendant of meetings of the Pasadena Horticultural Society, Knowles there met such legendary early-days avocado enthusiasts as Will Hertrich, Ernest Braunton, E. O. Franceschi, E. E. Knight, A. R. Rideout. Between high school and college, Ryerson worked briefly at F. O. Popenoe's West India Gardens, in Altadena, where the Fuerte variety was first propagated in California.

Knowles graduated from the University of California (Berkeley) in 1916 with a B.S. degree (earning his master' degree from the same institution in 1923). From 1919 to 1925, he was engaged in the university's agricultural extension service—in 1922 becoming assistant farm advisor in Los Angeles County and in 1924, farm advisor. It was in the latter capacity that he participated in the organization, in 1923, of the Exchange (today, Calavo).

From the agricultural extension service, Knowles's career took him first to Haiti, as a horticulturist, and thereafter to a variety of assignments in various parts of the world, including a stint (1928-34) in charge of the Division of Foreign Plant Introduction, USDA, becoming chief of the Bureau of Plant Industry in 1934. Returning to California, Knowles served as assistant dean of the College of Agriculture and professor of horticulture at the Davis campus, 1947-52. and in 1952 was appointed dean on the Berkeley campus and assistant director of the agricultural experiment station.

Though removed from the California scene. Knowles Ryerson maintained a keen interest in the development of the California avocado industry, recognized by the California Avocado Society by bestowal of an honorary membership which continued to the end of his life.

The activities, travels, and monumental accomplishments of Knowles Ryerson in his 97-year life defy telling in a brief sketch. He was an extraordinary man, and his good works have marked this industry indelibly. We were blessed to have him among us.