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ANNALS OF THE AVOCADO

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FOREWORD

The two articles next following are addressed to those desiring greater knowledge of the nomenclature and the history of the fascinating industry in which we are joined together. They are two chapters of a larger work in progress that aims eventually to provide further resources for those possessed of an historical bent.

The material presented here is basically my compilation of writings of the late Dr. Wilson Popenoe, some from the nineteen-twenties and earlier, others from the nineteen-thirties, and some revised and updated in the nineteen-seventies. They relate the early history (fifteen hundreds and sixteen hundreds) and provide a glossary of the many names of the avocado (*Persea americana*)—that extraordinary tree native to Mexico, Central America, and northern South America that has provided a nutritious staple food for the inhabitants of that region for centuries.

One remarkable man, Wilson Popenoe, contributed a great deal to the recent history of the avocado. Popenoe, a longtime personal friend and an honored member of the California Avocado Society, was a respected and beloved agricultural explorer, horticulturist, avocado specialist, educator, administrator, ambassador of good will throughout Latin America, and member of the legendary Cosmos Club of Washington, D.C.

Dr. Popenoe was the inspiration for much of my avocado exploration and collecting in the Americas. I had the rare privilege of consulting with Wilson on his wide knowledge and experience with the avocado for over 25 years, primarily in Honduras and Antigua, Guatemala.

Dr. Popenoe has an impressive bibliography of papers on the avocado, as well as other tropical crops. His career spanned the period from 1915 to the mid-1970s. Shortly before his death in 1975, he gave me two additional papers that he had recently written or revised, with the understanding that they would be taken to California and eventually published. These were a new paper on "Names of the Avocado," and a revised paper on "The Early History of the Avocado."

The paper on the avocado's names is reproduced essentially as Dr. Popenoe wrote it, with some additions and modifications that Dr. Eugenio Schieber and I made in consultation with Dr. Popenoe. This is published as a new publication. The other paper is published as a revision of "Early History," for it combines several earlier papers that Dr. Popenoe had published.

The paper on names is a remarkable article, and is the only complete and annotated version of this topic that covers the names of the avocado over its wide distribution in Mexico, Central, and South America. It clearly indicates the linguistic relationships of the many different native languages.

Following the paper on names is a somewhat modified version of the early history paper. This consists principally of Dr. Popenoe's unpublished 1970 early history paper, as well as sections from his "Manual of Tropical and Subtropical Fruits" and from his papers published in the 1934 and 1935 volumes of the California Avocado Society Yearbooks.

The origin of the avocado is a pertinent point in relation to avocado history. In a 1935 article on races of the avocado, Popenoe pointed out that all cultivated avocados are horticultural forms of *Persea americana*. The Mexican race (*Persea americana* var. *drymifolia*) was at that time commonly found on the slopes of Mt. Orizaba, and undoubtedly at other locations in Mexico. Zentmyer⁵ in 1961 reported apparently indigenous Mexican avocado trees in forests near Montemorelos, State of Tamaulipas, Mexico, growing with oaks, pines, and other native flora. The avocado trees had small green fruit, approximately 3/4 to 1 1/2 inches in length.

In the same 1935 article, Popenoe noted that Guatemalan avocado trees (*P. americana* var. *guatemalensis*) occur widely scattered over much of Guatemala at moderate elevations. He regarded wild *Persea nubigena* trees, found commonly on mountain slopes near Tecpan, Guatemala, and also in El Salvador, Mexico, and Nicaragua, as probable ancestors of *P. americana* var. *guatemalensis*. Schieber and Zentmyer regard two other indigenous trees in Central America as also probable ancestors of the Guatemalan race — *P. steyermarkii*, and the large tree known as Aguacate mico, designated as *P. tolemanensis* by Schieber and Zentmyer.

Both Popenoe, and later Storey, Bergh, and Zentmyer⁶, regard coastal Central America and northern South America as the origin of the so-called West Indian race. This race was misnamed in early days, as it was later evident that the "West Indian" race was not indigenous to the West Indies*. United Fruit Company botanist Paul Allen, in 1950 collected specimens in Golfo Dulce, coastal Costa Rica, from a large *P. americana* tree, and wrote on the herbarium label: ... "this is the first time this avocado has ever been collected in the wild." Popenoe also saw what he designated as native West Indian race trees in coastal northern Colombia near Santa Marta⁴.

*G. N. Collins's excellent 1905 *Florida Bulletin on the avocado* provides a brief reference to early history and is a remarkably complete summation of avocado culture and investigations up to that date. Collins uses the following sentence to introduce his *Bulletin*: "The avocado is a tree native to Central and South America, where it has been cultivated by the aborigines since very ancient times."

Literature

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5. Zentmyer, G.A. 1961. Collections for Phytophthora root for resistance in Mexico and the Caribbean, Calif. Avocado Society Yearbook 59-62.
6. Storey, W. B., Bergh, B., and Zentmyer, G. A 1986. The origin, indigenous range, and dissemination of the avocado. Calif. Avocado Society Yearbook 127-133.