

THE PROBLEM OF AVOCADO THIEVERY

T. G. Sutherland

Mr. Chairman: I was asked by our Secretary to talk to you about stealing avocados. I told him that I had no experience along that line—as there were no avocados in Michigan when I was a kid. However, in complying with his request, I have written to many avocado growers in the state asking what experience they have had with theft of fruit, and what control measures they could suggest. I wish to say here, that I appreciate very much the prompt replies which I received and the interest taken in the subject. Almost without exception, the growers have lost fruit by theft, some by thieves who steal for profit, taking fruit in marketable quantities, and others by petty pilfering tourists and orchard workers.

The general opinion seems to be that a first class fence with several strands of barbed wire at the top, and perhaps a couple of watch dogs, is the best protection.

G. B. Woodberry of Glendale, is planning to enclose his orchard with a wire fence, and is investigating the cost of an electrical connection and siren to operate if the fence is disturbed. W. H. Sallmon of Chula Vista, thinks that printed notices similar to those posted in Orange County orchards—the Association offering to double the reward of say \$25.00 for the arrest and conviction of thieves—might help. As it is rather difficult to apprehend avocado thieves unless they are caught in the act, Sheriff William Traeger believes the best way to handle the situation is to have someone around the property at all times. W. P. Sherlock of Fuente, writes that he dislikes the idea of being fenced in with a band of bad dogs, and he thinks the only way of stopping the professional thief is by tracing the fruit, warning dealers and furnishing lawyers to aid in prosecuting both dealers and thieves.

During the months of March and April, five Mexicans were captured— four of them convicted of stealing avocados, and sentenced to six months in the Orange County jail. Over two thousand pounds of fruit were taken from the dealers who had bought the fruit, and turned over to the Exchange. In each case the dealer lost the money he had paid for the fruit. During the period from January to May we estimate that over twenty thousand pounds of fruit was stolen, one grower alone losing nearly ten thousand pounds. A very large proportion of this fruit was quite immature and totally unfit for food. In practically every case where the thieves were caught the Exchange and Sheriff's office were handicapped by not having sufficient information from the grower. In most cases the fruit was first discovered on the market, the growers were then notified that they had lost the fruit and in some cases it was necessary to prove to the growers they had lost it before they were ready to make out a complaint.

Growers, cooperate with our Association and Exchange!

Let the Exchange handle your fruit so that the Exchange employees will know where all

the fruit is and readily recognize stolen fruit on the market. Keep a closer watch on your groves, and promptly notify the Exchange and County officials of thefts. When a theft is discovered get all the evidence available, such as footprints, method of picking, amount of fruit taken, kind of fruit taken, probable containers discovered by noticing the impression on the ground of sacks, boxes, etc., number of people implicated, exact date of loss and any other information that you may be able to gather.

In the cases mentioned, the fruit was identified in court by the following means:

1st—The variety. In some cases the variety discovery was grown by only one grower.

2nd—The combination of varieties.

3rd—The amount of fruit of different varieties.

4th—The general appearance of the fruit as to size, scars, probable time of picking, etc.

5th—Comparison of the stems on the fruit and the broken stems on the trees.

6th—Stolen fruit was usually mishandled, a number of varieties being mixed together in the sack or other container, the fruit was bruised, stems were either broken off long or pulled out at the button, immature and mature fruit mixed together.

In conclusion, I offer a ray of hope in this letter which was received by Thomas H. Shedden of Monrovia:

"Proprietor Florimel Orchard, Monrovia:

Dear Sir: I am back again in the 'glorious climate of California, and think I will enjoy it all the better if I try and square myself with you. Last year, one day when driving along the hills back of Monrovia, I took from your orchard four of the biggest alligator pears I ever saw, when no one but God in the blue sky was looking. Like old Adam, will say that the lady who was with me put me up to it. We took them back east with us. They were good eating, but will say that they didn't agree with my conscience, and I am enclosing a nice clean two dollar bill for your 'Conscience Fund, which I presume you have. I remember only the pretty name, Florimel, at the gate, or entrance, but hope you will receive this.

Very sincerely yours,

JOHN DOE."