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THE AVOCADO: RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

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Address delivered at the Annual Meeting at Whittier

Are Our Efforts Worth While?

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen;

Perhaps the leading thought among farmers of to-day is depression due to overproduction. We are here because we are vitally interested in building a new industry, the commercial production of avocados, which will add to the already groaning dinner table of the nation. What are our chances of success? Let us attempt to analyze the situation.

Due to the development of labor saving agricultural machinery just previous to the World War this country was rapidly approaching agricultural overproduction. The War, with its enormous demand for food stuffs, saved the situation for a time and speeded up production still more. We never missed the thousands of horses sent to Europe because their places were taken by tractors. After demobilization came deflation. A population which had learned food economy through the clever propaganda of "The clean dinner plate," was now confronted with an enormous surplus of food. Unfortunately, tractors do not eat hay and grain. Motive power which was once raised on a thousand farms, now flows out of the ground. One farmer with a tractor can produce as much food as four farmers with mules; and consumes in doing it, a mineral rather than an agricultural product. The petroleum industry is rapidly displacing agriculture and aiding the farmer in working himself out of a job. With many less mouths to feed we have much more food. Good roads and auto trucking bring a much larger proportion of the food produced to market. All the vast quantity of grain previously malted and distilled is now thrown back on an overstocked food market. No wonder the grain, hay and potato districts are depressed. Imagine if you can the effect on agriculture if all the oil wells were suddenly to dry up and all gas engines switched to alcohol which would have to be made from materials raised on farms. Then the Middle West would not need any sympathy.

But the farmer is not the only man in distress. Labor saving machinery is rapidly crowding the pick and shovel men to the wall. Recently I saw eleven men with a lot of complicated machinery lay one eighth mile of eight inch concrete highway in one day. Physical strength is coming to be in less and less demand. So we see now in this country the peculiar situation of great prosperity alongside of unprecedented unemployment. The fact is that gasoline and new machines are displacing men faster than they can find and adjust themselves to new jobs. What is needed is not a McNary-Haugen prop under the price of grain, but new industries to minister to new wants. The radio and moving-picture and automobile industries have helped. A real honest to

goodness aero-transportation industry would be of tremendous benefit. In agriculture we should encourage the production of non-food products, and particularly we should develop the ornamental plant industries

The relation between the foregoing remarks and avocado culture can best be shown by analyzing certain other trends of the time.

The food habits of this nation are undergoing a remarkable change. Human strength which needed calories is now giving way to brain which demands a varied food rich in vitamins. Bread and meat are now mixed with a much larger proportion of fruits and fresh vegetables, with the result that national health is vastly improved. This has been made possible by the development of the refrigerator car and refrigeration in transit. At the risk of tiring you with figures I wish to point out that in 1927, California alone shipped over 200 million dollars in value of fresh fruits and 64 million dollars in value of vegetables. The latter includes sixteen kinds of vegetables such as, 1¼ million crates of artichokes, 38,000 tons of cabbage, 3 million bushels of onions, 9 million crates of canteloupes, 17 million crates of lettuce, 2½ million crates of green peas, 736,000 crates of fresh carrots, 3 million crates of tomatoes and so on.

In the old days a man was glad to eat whatever he could get, but now being presented with such a variety, he is interested to pick and choose. The American citizen is giving more thought to the effect of different foods on his complexion, his digestion, his elimination. Popular magazines are filled with articles on foods as well as advertisements of foods. The science of dietetics is booming. A man's stomach is only so large. He now emphasizes quality rather than quantity. He seeks to avoid acidosis, constipation, and corpulency. He takes great satisfaction in the new menu of fruits and salads and fresh juices. He is revolting from a diet of meat and highly milled grains, and welcomes a salad fruit.

The avocado, being the aristocrat of salad fruits, fits precisely into this trend of the times. As fast as the ordinary citizen learns what the avocado is and has an opportunity to fully appreciate it, he wants it. This is a new want, which makes possible a new industry which in turn creates new wealth. Rest assured that from now on the citizen is going to have a fresh salad with his hog and hominy. The remarkable rise of the lettuce industry proves that. The point for us to decide is whether that lettuce leaf on his salad dish will support diced avocados or sliced cucumbers. This morning, in looking over the current number of the Literary Digest, I see on the rear cover a beautifully colored advertisement of a certain kind of salad oil. Here (holding up paper) is indeed a tempting display of six kinds of salads; tomatoes, pineapples, beans, asparagus, grapefruit and cucumbers. Avocado salad is conspicuous by its absence. Friends, until we get avocado salad included in such lists, we are not taking full advantage of our opportunities. When we consider the "Eat more Bread" and "Drink more milk" publicity campaigns, and then realize the wonderful dietetic value of the avocado, we can appreciate our unique opportunity which amounts almost to an obligation, to help supply the need for vitamins to a population already surfeited with calories. Of course the avocado has calories also, more in fact than bread or lean meat, but dietitians stress the advantage of getting calories in foods which, like the avocado, produce an alkaline reaction in the stomach rather than an acid reaction as is the case with bread and meat.

The avocado industry is apropos. The time is psychological. The opportunity is ours. Our efforts have been worth while.

The Path We Have Come.

The history of the avocado in California has been sketched a number of times, and it is not necessary now to go into great detail.

When the people who grew the first seedling avocados in Southern California came to realize the great value of the fruit, a number of different persons secured and introduced from Mexico and Guatemala the best kinds which could then be found, to form the basis on which to build a new industry. As soon as the propagation and distribution of these varieties was under way there came a need for some association for mutual benefit. This Association "was formed in 1915 and has since been active in developing cultural methods on the one hand and introducing and advertising the fruit on the other. So far it has materialized the vision of its founders. The Association has been active along many lines. Faced with an overwhelming number of new seedling varieties which were causing confusion in the markets, the variety committee gave publicity to a few recommended kinds. In judging the commercial value of new seedlings, the committee takes into consideration the future good of the industry as a whole, rather than the immediate profits of some nurserymen who may control the stock of any particular variety. This policy has subjected the committee to severe criticism at times, but again and again its acts have been approved at the annual meetings, when brought before the membership as a whole.

The Association has been active in disseminating useful information in regard to cultural methods. It has been diligent in advertising and introducing the fruit to the consumer; in the preparation of many useful publications which are not only appreciated by the membership, but are in great demand by libraries, horticultural students, and economists throughout the world. It has stimulated and encouraged scientific research and investigations. It has guided and moulded legislation, insisted on adequate quarantines where needed to exclude injurious pests and diseases. It has held meetings and exhibits of fruit for the purpose of bringing about acquaintance and cooperation among growers. It initiated the cooperative marketing of fruit in 1922 and organized and launched the Marketing Exchange, now known officially as "Calavo Growers of California." One of the most important accomplishments, and one which was not won without a long, hard fight against many selfish interests, was the inclusion of the avocado in the California Fruit and Vegetable Standardization Act, and the adoption of the legal Standard of Eight per cent of fat for the distribution and sale of fruit. This has been of inestimable benefit to the industry as a whole, although selfish interests or uninformed persons are continually attempting to break down our standards.

The history of Association activities has not been entirely peaceful. The path has been bestrewn with obstacles. Success so far has not been won without an occasional fight against the vicious attacks of selfish interests which have been led to believe that they would profit by our downfall. The board of directors (many of them very busy men) have given their time and donated traveling expenses in order to further the interests of the Avocado Industry. Their attitude has been one of broadmindedness and altruism. They deserve greater support from the membership as a whole. If more members would

attend board meetings and observe the volume of interesting and important items demanding attention, they would take more pride in the organization.

Where are We Going?

Since 1924 the avocado industry has benefited from the work of two organizations, the "California Avocado Association" and the "Calavo Growers of California," which latter is a California Corporation whose function it is to cooperatively market the fruit of its members. There is a complete community of interests between these two organizations and their association is kept close through harmonious cooperation.

Calavo Growers has already made great progress in the orderly marketing of avocados, but progress has been made in the face of serious difficulties. As I see it, one of the greatest of these difficulties is the fact that the Association has largely failed to sell the avocado idea to the old and experienced growers of oranges, lemons, and walnuts of California, who are experienced in Cooperative Marketing. But few of them have elected to launch into avocado growing in a broad and sound business way. The result of this is that the great majority of the members of Calavo Growers are growers in a very small way; city and professional people or new arrivals from the east, who for the most part have no adequate conception of the importance and value of cooperative marketing. For many of these people their avocados represent their first agricultural product, and they are very jealous of the thrill they get in peddling their little jag of fruit and getting the money for it. If by chance, by not counting their time and traveling expense they occasionally get a few cents more than their neighbors who market through Calavo and thus contribute to the upbuilding of the industry, they feel very proud of themselves and do much crowing about it. This puts the neighbors on the defensive, and the defensive is the awkward side of any proposition. Calavo has 338 members, about twenty-five of whom produce the bulk of the fruit. The other 313 are more easily influenced by insidious propaganda with the result that there is too large a turnover in membership to be comfortable. I predict that when the present large commercial plantings come into bearing this embarrassing situation will greatly improve. The corner groceryman is willing to dicker for five boxes of fruit but he will not be so much interested in five tons. All this leads up to the fact that the industry will benefit by more fruit production.

As a class the indifferent fruit dealer is not one whit interested in the avocado industry as such. If someone else creates the demand, he is willing to profit by catering to it. He is, as a rule, hostile to cooperative marketing and is often willing to lose some money in order to discredit cooperation and help break it down.

The average fruit retailer is usually about twenty-five years behind the times in his thinking if he thinks at all. If he does not wake up he will soon find himself between two millstones, the Agricultural Cooperative on the one hand and the Chain Store on the other, which is in reality only another form of cooperation. The sooner we get into position to deal effectively with the chain stores the better for us. Let us welcome them and cooperate with them. They are interested in buying standardized products in vast quantities, and that is what we will have to sell. More fruit production will hasten this day.

Another serious difficulty immediately before us is the wide fluctuation from year to year in volume of crop. To be fully successful a cooperative should be able to run on a more

or less even keel. The organization should be able to retain its experienced men and not let some of them go as Calavo Growers had to do this year. We are not growing steadily but by leaps and bounds. Mr. Hodgkin, the Calavo manager, is always trying to figure out ahead where our next bound will land us. It is not good business to tickle the palates of the nation one year and then leave them wishing the next. Last year's crop was suddenly large and prices were disappointing, but as a palate tickling opportunity it was a great success. This year the crop is short and I am told that distributors have to furnish bottles of smelling salts with the fruit to be used in reviving the would-be consumers when they are informed of the price. It may be remarked here that the fact that Calavo Growers are distributing 40,000 pounds a month this spring at prices which mean between 75 cents and a dollar a pound to the consumer shows that we have created a very real new want. The consumer is putting up an awful howl, which shows that he is really interested, and the fact that these prices are being paid is proof of the genuineness and power of this new want which we have created.

Another difficulty which, I think may be a shortcoming and laid at the door of the Association, is our failure so far to get down to brass tacks in the matter of average yields. We have been too willing to pass by empty trees in order to admire the heavily loaded tree. So far our average production has not been up to our hopes and expectations. Perhaps the real estate interest of some of us has boosted our expectations too high. I once made an examination and report on a tract of land destined for subdivision. In going over the report with the manager of the company I innocently remarked that all the way through I had tried to be conservative. He instantly replied "That is the only trouble with it. You have been too darned conservative."

We must remember that the climatological district best suited to avocados conforms very closely with the Valencia orange district. Valencia oranges under favorable conditions are still very profitable. The question is often asked me; "Which shall I plant, Valencias or avocados?" I often advise some of each. A friend of mine is said to have picked this year 12,000 pounds of Fuertes from a fraction less than two acres of what are supposed to be full bearing trees. We consider it a wonderful crop. Valencias on the same soil and at the same age would yield 60,000 pounds without eliciting much comment. Valuing the Valencias at five cents a pound, the avocados would have to bring twenty-five cents a pound in order to break even. Our difficulty in meeting this comparison is, as I pointed out before, the exceedingly miscellaneous character of our plantings. Most of our full bearing groves consist of a mixture of varieties, many of them obsolete. I do not know of a ten acre grove of one variety in full bearing to-day. The two acre grove I just referred to is a top-worked grove. It is my belief that when some of the standard commercial plantings now started come to full bearing that our best yield records will go to smash and the income far exceed that of the Valencia orange. But candor compels me to remark that there is a lot of difference between believing a thing and knowing it. If we hope to strengthen Calavo Growers by admitting a large number of cooperatively minded Valencia orange growers, it is up to us to demonstrate what can be done in a large commercial way. Again I say that what we need is more fruit production.

The 4000 acres already planted, when in full bearing will produce more fruit. Will that be enough to glut the market? I estimate that the 4000 odd acres now planted, when in full

bearing will produce approximately thirty times as much fruit as is now consumed in Los Angeles County at present high prices; where less than one person in five ever tasted an avocado. There is room for a sound and conservative development with much hard work ahead of us. There is no excuse for any boom in the business.

We are not now overproducing avocados. The one and only reason we are not is Calavo Growers. We are not likely to overproduce avocados in the near future so long as Calavo Growers continues to function successfully. The day Calavo Growers quits business, that same day we have over-production, we are shot to pieces and ever watchful vultures will not be slow to pick our bones.