

California Avocado Association 1936 Yearbook 21: 51-59

Looking Back

Wilson Popenoe

(The following letter introduces the accompanying article.)

At Lima, Honduras. 17 December, 1936.

"Dear Carter:

Many thanks for yours of 20 October, which reached me on my return from a trip through Mexico. I have whipped together some recollections of the early days, and enclose the manuscript herewith.

I have here three heavy volumes of field notes, one on the first Guatemalan explorations, one on Mexico, and a second on Guatemala, Costa Rica, and South America. I also have a volume containing transcriptions of all of Schmidt's field notes, covering his Mexican introductions. These volumes I am storing at my home in Antigua. If I get 'bumped off' suddenly, see that Paul turns them over to you for filing in the appropriate place in California. Some day they will prove of great interest, because they will furnish an opportunity to demonstrate what tremendous fools we were back in those ridiculous days of 1910-1920. When all is said and done, California hasn't had very many really good avocados which haven't come directly or indirectly from Atlixco. That is an interesting fact to ponder over.

Always yours cordially,

WILSON POPENOE."

My friend Carter Barrett has asked me to contribute my recollections of the early days of the avocado industry in California. At the expense of my personal vanity,—for it must ever be painful for one to realize that he has reached the "old timer" stage of his career,—I seat myself at my typewriter in far-off Honduras to recall some of the incidents and personalities connected with the industry during its formative years.

As a prefatory note, I would like to discuss for a moment the background of the industry,—more to emphasize our need of further information than to contribute any new facts.

WHEN WAS THE AVOCADO FIRST PLANTED IN CALIFORNIA?

I recall many early discussions of this problem with those most familiar with the horticultural history of California. It was the general impression that the Franciscan

missionaries who came from Mexico toward the end of the XVIII century, must have brought this tree with them. If I am not mistaken, they are given credit for introducing the fig, the grape, the olive, the white sapote, and several other fruits. At San Diego, San Juan Capistrano, San Gabriel, San Fernando, and Santa Barbara,—all sites of early missions,—climatic conditions permit avocados of the Mexican race to thrive. But so far as I have heard, there is no record of such an introduction.

I can offer only one explanation, and it may not be the correct one. The early missionaries came up the West coast, presumably from parts of Mexico where hardy avocados.—those of the Mexican race,—are not common. If they brought with them seeds of the large-fruited lowland forms, the trees probably would not have survived. At least, they would not have been very successful, and would have died and been forgotten.

In his bulletin, "Avocado Culture in California" (No. 365 of the Agricultural Experiment Station, Berkeley) Knowles Ryerson, writing in 1923, says:

"The first reference to the introduction of the avocado into California is made in the Report of the Visiting Committee of the California State Agricultural Society in 1856. According to this report Dr. Thomas J. White, living near San Gabriel, had imported the avocado from Nicaragua along with other tropical fruiting plants. It was not until some years later that the avocado became definitely established through the introduction of three trees from Mexico in 1871 by Judge R. B. Ord of Santa Barbara. Two of the three trees of his importation for many years bore fruit in Santa Barbara and served to create interest in further plantings."

From the above, it is to be inferred that the Nicaraguan introduction made by Dr. White of San Gabriel was not successful. This is what I would expect, since I consider it almost certain that the West Indian race was again concerned, not the hardy, thin-skinned Mexican. I have never explored Nicaragua extensively, but I have seen something of its avocados on the Pacific side, and they are all West Indians. Those of the Chinandega Valley, not far from the port of Corinto, are famous for their quality.

JUDGE ORD AND STEVENS THE FIRST?

The importation made by Judge Ord of Santa Barbara brought the Mexican race into the picture, and resulted in the successful establishment of avocados in California. Of course, I do not feel certain that this race had not been introduced and successfully established earlier; but I have seen no evidence, written or otherwise, to that effect. I recall discussing the subject with Dr. Franceschi of Santa Barbara about 1910. At that time he gave me a photograph of one of the Ord trees, which I published in the Pomona College Journal of Economic Botany (September, 1911); but I am not certain the tree was then alive. On the contrary, I have a vague recollection that it had died a few years previously, and for this reason I never saw it on any of my pilgrimages to that Mecca of plant lovers, Santa Barbara. It was a small-fruited, thin-skinned Mexican avocado, and so far as I know it was not the progenitor of any varieties which later attracted horticultural attention.

Dr. Franceschi, who in my day was the Dean of California plantsman interested in

tropical and subtropical species, considered that Kinton Stevens of Montecito, near Santa Barbara, shared with Judge Ord the honor of having been among the very first to plant the avocado successfully in California. Perhaps there are more specific data in Dr. Franceschi's little book on exotic plants, —published I believe sometime in the eighteen nineties. In any event, someone should go into this matter fully, before any more time is lost.

As I have intimated, none of these earlier introductions had any bearing on the subsequent commercial development of avocado growing in California, except insofar as it served to stimulate interest in the possibilities of this tree. The same is not true of the introductions made by a small group of enthusiasts in the Los Angeles area. That grand old horticultural journalist, Ernest Braunton, can and should write the history of this work, for he was in contact with it, and knew all the men concerned. What I know, I learned from talking with men like Braunton, Franceschi, and more particularly Clarence Harvey, son of J. C. Harvey who was a prominent member of the group.

I met Clarence Harvey in Mexico, during the summer of 1918, and he gave me the following account, which I will preface by saying that his father was born in Canada, but moved to the United States in early life. In 1882 he reached Los Angeles, where he bought a property on what is now North Figueroa Street, about three blocks from the old Murrieta place on College Street. Here he cultivated many new and rare plants, by his example doing much to encourage and stimulate others along this same line.

JACOB MILLER—JUAN MURRIETA

There were, at that time, (so Clarence says), no avocados cultivated in that region. But in 1884 Jacob Miller, who lived at the mouth of Laurel Canyon in Hollywood, obtained several young plants, one of which he gave to Mr. Harvey, who planted it at his Figueroa Street home. This tree came into bearing about 1889, and attracted much attention. Juan Murrieta, who saw the fruit, (which was pear-shaped, purple, and of fairly good quality) became so interested in avocados that he thenceforth devoted much time to them, with the result known to every avocado fancier in California.

J. C. Harvey moved away from Los Angeles about 1895, going first to Sierra Madre, thence to Mexico, where he developed a plantation near Santa Rosa in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. He died in 1914.

Jacob Miller and Juan Murrieta continued their interest in avocados. I remember visiting their places about 1909. The old "Miller" avocado tree, from which many seedlings had been planted in Southern California, was then one of the interesting horticultural sights,—at least to the avocado enthusiast, and even at that early day there were many of *us*.

Sometime in the eighteen nineties, avocados began to reach the markets of Los Angeles from Mexico (here again Mr. Braunton can give us all the facts); and curiously enough, many of these appear to have come from the town of Atlixco, in the State of Puebla, where we later obtained Fuerte, Puebla, and numerous other fine varieties. It was largely due to the activities of Juan Murrieta that seeds from these fruits were planted at Los Angeles. From the resulting trees he later distributed seeds and

seedlings, some of which played an important part in the commercial development of the industry. But I am getting ahead of my story.

THE BEGINNING OF AVOCADO CULTURE IN FLORIDA

It has always seemed logical to me that the Spaniards, when they colonized St. Augustine, should have brought avocado seeds from the West Indies and planted them in Florida. But here again, as in the case of California, we have no records. Even if this assumption is correct, it is not likely that trees of the West Indian race would have become permanently established that far north.

The first recorded introduction was that made by Henry Perrine, who sent trees from Mexico in 1833 to his grant of land below Miami. We have no further history of this introduction.

The proximity of Cuba, and the abundance of good avocados of the West Indian race in that Island, resulted in many introductions during the years when Southern Florida was developing. About the turn of the century, the railroad reached Miami, bringing with it many new settlers. Among these was a lean, picturesque character from Northern Florida named George B. Cellon. He was—and is—by nature a plantsman, and he was not long in devoting his attention to the avocado and the mango. Without wishing to detract from the credit due other pioneers,—notably John B. Beach of West Palm Beach, Professor P. H. Rolfs, and E. N. Reasoner, I believe Cellon did more than anyone else, in those very early days, to put the avocado on the basis of an orchard crop in South Florida.

All this may seem irrelevant in a paper which purports to treat of the early days of avocado culture in California, but it really is not. I go into these details because I believe the commercial establishment of avocado culture in Florida was one of the major factors behind its development in California. If I recall correctly, Cellon first began to propagate budded avocados about 1901. He prowled around the lower end of the state, looking for varieties which were worth perpetuating, and soon hit upon the Trapp,—a Cuban seedling growing in the door yard of a gentleman of that name at Coconut Grove, just south of Miami. That Cellon showed a very keen appreciation of what constitutes a good commercial avocado is demonstrated by the fact that this variety and the Pollock, selected by him at the same time, still remain important commercially, in spite of all the years which have passed and all the other varieties which have competed for commercial favor.

MUCH INTEREST IN SOUTH FLORIDA

During those first years of the new century, horticultural interest in avocados and mangos ran high in South Florida. John B. Beach propagated them at his nursery in West Palm Beach. Professor Rolfs, who was then in charge of the Department of Agriculture's little experiment station in Miami (where I had the pleasure of working in later years) did much to stimulate and encourage interest in avocado culture. P. J. Wester, whom Professor Rolfs had picked up at the Hotel Royal Palms in Miami, where he was head gardener, worked industriously on methods of propagation, and

assembled many promising seedlings for trial. A few years later, William J. Krome,—one of the ablest men ever connected with horticulture in South Florida,—terminated his engineering career with the construction of the overseas railroad to Key West, and settled at Homestead, 40 miles below Miami, where he devoted the remainder of his life to experimenting with tropical fruits. How much these pioneers gave to the infant avocado industry! I think it safe to say that every one of them put more cash into it than he ever got back, not to mention his own efforts during many hard years.

Cellon and Beach supplied most of the trees for commercial planting in those early days. Wester went to the Philippines, and was replaced by Edward Simmonds, whose memory is revered throughout the southern half of the state. Under the direction of David Fairchild, then in charge of the Office of Foreign Seed and Plant Introduction of the U. S. Department of Agriculture, the little experiment station on Brickell Avenue at Miami became the center of investigational work on avocados. Simmonds, every inch a plantsman, backed by the enthusiasm and vision of his chief, produced many new and promising seedlings, and did much to educate growers in the care and handling of avocados under the peculiar conditions of Southern Florida.

CALIFORNIA AGAIN: THE SEARCH FOR THE BEST LOCAL SEEDLINGS

At this point I begin to wax autobiographical, and I trust I shall be pardoned for so doing. It is not to emphasize the part played by my father, F. O. Popenoe, and myself in the early days of the California avocado industry, but because this paper is based on personal reminiscences.

We moved to Los Angeles from Topeka, Kansas, in the summer of 1904, and two years later settled at Altadena, where we had sufficient land to play with plants, though not enough for commercial purposes,—nor indeed was any such objective in father's mind at the time, for he had never been engaged in a horticultural enterprise, though coming of a family in which the horticultural instinct was strong. He had spent much time in Central America during the late nineties, and had there become familiar with the avocado. One afternoon,—it must have been in 1907,—he came back from Pasadena with two seedling avocados which he had bought from D. W. Coolidge, who had recently opened a flower shop on East Colorado Street. We planted them, and though neither ever amounted to anything, they sufficed to start us in the avocado business.

From that time forward our interest grew. I was a youngster, spending part of my time at Pasadena High School and the rest in the garden. As was already true of other enthusiasts in Southern California, we were soon in correspondence with David Fairchild at Washington, and with George B. Cellon, P. J. Wester, John B. Beach, J. L. Hickson and E. N. Reasoner in Florida. We were greatly encouraged by the progress being made in that state. While no one felt confident that the West Indian varieties, which formed the basis of their industry, would prove equally valuable in the different climate of California, everyone wanted to try them. A few years later the Office of Foreign Seed and Plant Introduction shipped several extensive collections of these varieties to Southern California, one of which was sent to us. We worked hard over them, as did the others who received similar sets, but little came of our efforts,—except further demonstration of the necessity of relying on other sources for varieties on which

to base industrial development.

TAFT ONE OF FIRST BUDDERS

During these years,—1908 to 1910,—local enthusiasts began to scour the countryside for promising seedlings. Propagation by budding was mastered,— and in this connection I wish someone would tell who first demonstrated the feasibility of commercial propagation by this method in California. When we came into the picture, C. P. Taft of Orange had been budding avocados for several years; perhaps others had also done so.

During 1909, 1910 and 1911, I spent much of my time on the hunt for local seedlings which might be worth propagation. C. P. Taft was an inspiration. Always willing to give his time, and to answer questions to the very best of his ability, he helped and guided not only ourselves but everyone else who was interested in the young industry. Cash was pretty scarce with all of us, and automobiles were still a great luxury. Nor were the roads what they are today. I used to go to Santa Ana on the Pacific Electric, then over to Orange on the "dummy", then hire a bicycle and ride several miles out to Mr. Taft's place through the dust.

Most of the promising trees were in the Los Angeles-Hollywood area and at Orange. But as interest in the avocado grew, everybody with a seedling tree came forward, and there were more "favorite sons" than we could handle. Each nurseryman chose his own varieties and was convinced the future of the industry depended on them. What a lot of mistakes we made. There were not many stabilizing influences at the start, nor did we have any idea how these new varieties were going to behave when propagated by budding and moved into new conditions of climate and soil. We got many surprises.

Among those whom I particularly recall as being actively interested in avocado growing, during this period, are several men who are still with us, and others who have gone. At Santa Barbara there was dear old Doctor Franceschi (later known to us as Dr. E. O. Fenzi), always the enthusiastic plantsman, but not so intimately connected with the commercial side of the problem as many others. He showed me the White avocado tree in Santa Barbara, and first took me out to Joseph Sexton's place at Goleta. I well recall how charmed I was by Mr. Sexton's reception of an inquisitive youngster who came to take his time and look at his avocados. Mr. Sexton was a horticulturist of the old school, a genuine plantsman, never seriously concerned with profits, but deeply interested in trying everything which held promise of becoming useful to the community. He spent much money testing seedlings from Hawaii, Mexico, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Puerto Rico. So far as I know, none of these ever came to anything; but Joseph Sexton helped to clear away the doubt which then existed regarding the possibilities of West Indian avocados in California.

INTERESTING PIONEER TREES

In the Los Angeles area, the most interesting group of trees was the Murrieta seedlings, several of which were propagated by nurserymen. The Walker trees at Hollywood, which received much publicity in the early days,—exceeded slightly later by the Ganter

tree at Whittier, which constituted the eighth wonder of the world for a very short time,— were also Murrieta products. In my notebook I have the following item, dated at Hollywood Oct. 19, 1915: "The Walker tree will be 20 years old next spring, the Royal and the Challenge 19; all came from Mr. Murrieta's place as young seedlings."

Of course we all made pilgrimages to Jacob Miller's place, at that time cut up into several properties, some of which had passed out of Mr. Miller's hands. But the old Miller tree was still alive, and there were other interesting tropical fruits: Cherimoyas, a fruiting mango, and a Casimiroa. Near by were the Dickey trees, also the Solano, and the Lyon — all attracting much attention. Not far away, at Sherman, was the Harman, and its enthusiastic owner, Edgar, of the same surname. The industry with which Ed. Harman popularized his variety was worthy of a better cause; though an avocado of fair quality by the standards of those days, it had scant commercial possibilities as subsequent experience has shown.

Over at Monrovia, later to become a center of avocado growing, there was the Chappelow tree, and its owner, Billy Chappelow, who never quite recovered from the distinction his variety received when it was described and figured in the 1905 Yearbook of the U. S. Department of Agriculture. True, it was a good

little fruit, so far as eating quality was concerned, and the tree was hardy, as are all seedlings of the Mexican race. But it could not stand the competition of fruits like the Lyon and Blakeman and others of the Guatemalan race, and I suppose it has long since been consigned to the limbo of forgotten varieties, perpetuated only in the pages of Professor Condit's list. This reminds me to comment on the usefulness and value of the latter. We should always have an historical record of varieties, and so far we have done pretty well. I have only one regret, which is, that we did not preserve more data regarding the origin of the early seedlings. For example, on looking over my paper "The Avocado in Southern California" (Pomona College Journal of Economic Botany, Vol. 1, No. 1, February, 1911), I note with profound regret that I failed to say a word about the history of the several horticultural varieties therein described for the first time. The Fowler, a Pasadena seedling of the Mexican race, the Ganter, the Chappelow, the Harman, the Blake, the White, the Miller, the Walker, and the Lyon were all first described in that publication, and it would be immensely interesting,—now,—if I had included notes regarding the history of each. Such notes would have been easy to obtain at that time. I suppose it is not a matter of importance, especially where it concerns varieties which have disappeared or possess no commercial value at present; nevertheless, as part of the history of the industry, we should know the source of all these early seedlings.

But to return to the story: Down at Long Beach we ran across an interesting tree we called the Meserve, and in Los Angeles the Dickinson. Near Santa Ana the Northrop and slightly later the Sharpless. And I must mention again the group on Mr. Taft's place at Orange. For several years we thought his Taft variety would prove to be the premier avocado of California. He had several others which held the limelight from time to time, and he had tested a large number of seedlings, from many different sources.

I have mentioned by no means all of the trees which came up for consideration as commercial varieties in those early days. I have few of my old notes beside me, and

have doubtless forgotten many details.

THE SEARCH IS CARRIED ABROAD

It must have been about 1909 that the nursery firm known as the West India Gardens was organized at Altadena, primarily for the propagation and sale of avocados, though several other new or rare subtropicals, such as the feijoa and the cherimoya, were also grown. T. U. Barber soon joined the organization as a partner, and I was Plant Propagator, at the magnificent salary of \$5 per week, or it may have been per month,—I don't recall, and it doesn't matter very much anyway. D. W. Coolidge,—always a good friend, and one of the most enthusiastic plantsmen we ever had in California,—had taught me how to bud avocados, and we went ahead as rapidly as our slender finances would permit. In the autumn of 1910, I went over to Pomona College to study under Professor Charles Fuller Baker, who had recently come to the college after working several years in Cuba and Brazil. I was eager to know more about tropical plants, and the fact that Professor Baker had actually worked with them personally thrilled me. Nor was I disappointed: he was the most inspiring teacher I ever had, one whose enthusiasm and humanity were equaled only by those of my later chief in the U. S. Department of Agriculture, David Fairchild.

But I could not stay away from the avocados for long. I shuttled back and forth between Altadena and Claremont, with frequent week-end trips into the field to look up promising or interesting new trees, sometimes alone, sometimes accompanied by Knowles Ryerson or Ralph Cornell. A simple-minded lot of visionaries, we not only wrote, but actually believed, that the avocado industry would outstrip the citrus industry within a quarter of a century. Twenty-five years have now passed, and the accuracy of our judgment may well be questioned, though not our sincerity.

Notwithstanding the considerable number of local seedlings which had come upon the scene, vigorously recommended by their backers, it was still evident that the ideal commercial avocado for California conditions had not put in its appearance. You will say, of course, that we should have recognized, in the first place, that no one variety would be found suitable to the diverse conditions of climate and soil which are represented in California. But we did not realize any such thing. We thought of the Washington Navel orange, and more particularly of the Trapp avocado of Florida. We wanted a California Trapp; an avocado of good commercial characteristics which could be grown from San Diego to Santa Barbara.

TO MEXICO WE THEN TURNED

My father had been in Mexico, and had seen in that country many handsome avocados. We built up correspondence with various people in Mexico who further aroused our interest. We had come by this time,—1911,—to feel pretty definitely that West Indian avocados would never be commercially successful in California, unless it might be in a very few favored spots. Mexico, with its wide range of varieties growing in the highlands,—which meant hardiness to us,—seemed the logical place to seek for our ideal.

Just at that time, we had at the West India Gardens a young man named Carl B. Schmidt, whose father had been an intimate friend of my father's during early days in Kansas. Carl had been studying agriculture at Cornell for two or three years. He had been reared in Mexico, whence his family had recently returned to the States because of the trouble incident to the downfall of the Diaz regime.

Carl seemed the logical man for the Mexican job,—for by that time father had decided we must go after those Mexican avocados. He went, with instructions to visit all the best avocado-growing regions which lay at high elevations, hunt out the best seedlings, and send up budwood accompanied by specimens of fruit.

Between August and December, 1911, Carl Schmidt visited Santa Maria del Rio in the state of San Luis Potosi; Guanajuato in the state of the same name; Queretaro, in the state of the same name; and Atlixco, in the state of Puebla. From each of these regions he sent us budwood and fruits, with notes regarding location of the trees from which they came, season of ripening, and so on. Both budwood and fruit specimens usually arrived in good condition. His introductions numbered 41 in all; of which Nos. 1 to 3 were from Santa Maria del Rio, 4 to 6 from Guanajuato, 7 to 12 from Queretaro, and 13 to 41 from Atlixco.

When Schmidt's material reached Altadena, I photographed the fruit specimens and made pomological descriptions of them. We had an abundant supply of stock plants in the nurseries, and were able to save a large percentage of the varieties. Many of them, of course, passed out of the picture very promptly; others looked promising but ultimately were crowded out by better ones; while Fuerte (No. 15) and Puebla (No. 13) have so far held their own against all comers. How well I remember inserting the first buds of No. 15! The bud-sticks were fat and fresh; the eyes were strong, and I felt sure they would not drop,—for we had much trouble with buds "going blind" after coming this long distance. Billy Baxter was tying for me, and we slapped those buds in at a good rate. Most of them took, and in a few months' time they were making such strong growth,—they were so far ahead of most others,—that father called the variety "Fuerte,"—"the vigorous one." Several trees from this original shipment of budwood are still growing at Altadena. They were never removed from the nursery rows. We let them stand there, to furnish budwood in the years immediately succeeding, and there they are today.

TRIBUTE TO CARL SCHMIDT

I have always felt that Carl Schmidt received scant credit for the part he played in building the young avocado industry. It is to him that we owe Fuerte and Puebla. Two successful varieties out of forty,—a five percent average. That is mighty good. In the ten years I spent hunting avocados for the U. S. Department of Agriculture I never approached it.

Schmidt came home, and we continued to comb Mexico at long range. Roberto Johnston and Frank Furnivall, both of whom lived in the country, traveled about at the expense of West India Gardens for brief periods, and sent more budwood and fruits. Knowles Ryerson, in the Pomona College Journal of Economic Botany for February,

1913 (Vol. III, No. 1), described these introductions. Nothing ever came of them, so far as I know.

At about this same time. D. E. Clower of Monrovia made several introductions from Mexico, and one from Chile. I believe Edwin G. Hart made another from Mexico. And E. E. Knight came back from Guatemala with several promising specimens. The subsequent history of all these is better known to those who have remained in constant touch with the California avocado industry, than

IN CONCLUSION

It is exactly a quarter of a century since Fuerte and Puebla were introduced. Nine months after their arrival, my brother Paul and I left California for a trip around the world, the major object of which was to bring back date palms from Arabia and North Africa. On returning to the United States in the spring of 1913, I joined the U. S. Department of Agriculture. Under the direction of David Fairchild, I commenced a detailed study of avocados growing in Tropical America, and a search for varieties which seemed worthy of trial in Florida and California. This job occupied nearly ten years and took me from Mexico to Chile as well as through the West Indies,—but that is another story.

President's Note—One of the major objectives of the Association this year is the gathering of all available historical matter pertaining to the avocado industry and placing it for safe keeping in the fireproof library of the Division of Sub-tropical Horticulture at the University of California at Los Angeles. We feel that no time is to be lost if some records of the early days of the industry are to be preserved. There they will be available to research workers. Dr. Coit heads a committee on such arrangements.

The letter by Dr. Wilson Popenoe is the result of one of our efforts in this matter. You will note in his covering letter that Dr. Popenoe promises his very valuable volumes of field notes on his Central and South American explorations together with the transcriptions of the Carl Schmidt notes on the West India Garden introductions amongst which was the Fuerte, are to some day be a part of this collection. This is most generous on his part.

Mr. Ernest Braunton has a paper in process of preparation along the lines suggested by Dr. Popenoe. Mr. Hertrich has contributed his recollections and Mr. Ryerson and others have promised contributions.

We are most anxious to have any person who has memories of the early days of the industry to contribute manuscripts, pictures, advertising booklets, programs or any other material that will add to our information of the days that will soon slip past recalling in any other way. We are fortunate in having so many of the early pioneers still with us. Anyone having material they would be willing to contribute or promise for a later time should write or see the Secretary of the Association.