

The Pilgrimage to Atlixco

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One of the remarkable pilgrimages of history began on the eighth of April, 1938, when thirty-eight men and women left Los Angeles for Atlixco, Mexico, to pay homage to the parent avocado tree of the Fuerte variety. This gesture of appreciation is remarkable, because for the first time agriculturists of one nation acknowledged a debt of gratitude to the generosity of those of another nation, who had made an important economic contribution to their welfare. It is outstanding in an age of dictators and military leaders, in that the tribute was paid, not to a successful general, a religious saint or great statesman, but to a tree and an humble farmer, whose contribution, generously given, founded a new horticultural industry and provided a new source of food for a great people.

For many of you, who have come into the avocado industry in the last few years, a very brief review of the history leading up to this gesture, would probably be helpful in understanding why it was made.

The avocado became definitely established in California in 1871, with the introduction of three trees by Judge Ord of Santa Barbara.

In the nineties, a number of men became interested in the possibilities of this new fruit, one of the leaders being Juan Murrieta. Mr. Murrieta imported a number of wicker hampers of the fruit from Atlixco, through several seasons. He planted seeds of these fruits himself and gave others to friends. From these seeds came the first named variety—the Murrieta Green and a number of other seedlings of later prominence. Other pioneers of this early period were Jacob Miller and J. C. Harvey of Los Angeles, Dr. Franceschi of Santa Barbara, W. W. Prior of Escondido and C. P. Taft of Orange.

EARLY BUDWOOD IMPORTERS

Early in the twentieth century, many of these seedlings had begun bearing and attracted considerable attention to the possibility of another fruit industry for California. Several individuals, sensing this, began to raise nurseries of avocado trees at the beginning of the second decade of the century. Several of these persons had lived or travelled in Mexico and Central America and felt that even better varieties could be found and imported from there. Such persons included W. D. Stephens of Montebello, E. E. Knight of Yorba Linda. E. G. Hart of Los Angeles and the Popenoes of Altadena.

The West India Gardens of Altadena, organized by the Popenoes and T. U. Barber, for the purpose of growing avocado nursery stock, commissioned Carl

Schmidt, then a young man twenty-one years old, to go into Mexico in 1911 and send them fruit and buds of the most promising avocados he could locate. Schmidt spent some time at Queretaro selecting better thinskins and then proceeded to Atlixco, in the State of Puebla, where he found many trees of both thin and thick skin avocados growing in a locality already famous for superior fruit.

Carl Schmidt sent fruit and budwood of some forty varieties to Altadena, where most of them were successfully propagated. The 1913 freeze roared down upon Southern California and was particularly disastrous to young nursery stock. Of all Schmidt's varieties, two were outstanding in resistance to the effects of the cold and in their rapid and vigorous recovery. One was the Puebla; and the other the Fuerte, which had now earned its name of sturdy or strong from the Spanish (Fuerte). A block of about seventy-five of these Fuerte trees were planted by J. T. Whedon of Yorba Linda and in three or four years had made phenomenal returns to their grower. Interest then grew in the variety by leaps and bounds and as it proved the easiest variety to propagate for the nurserymen, it did not take many years for its superior eating and marketing qualities to place it far in the lead of all other avocados for California.

Today the Fuerte variety comprises around seventy-five per cent of the California acreage and is shipped to eastern markets by the carload. It seems destined to occupy that position for a long period as no other variety matures at its season either here or elsewhere with any comparable quality and there is no such variety in prospect.

DR. HURLEY SUGGESTED PLAN

For many years, visitors to the parent tree at Atlixco were accorded every courtesy by its owner, Senor Alejandro Le Blanc, and in 1936, two articles with illustrations, describing such visits, were printed in the Association's Yearbook. One was by A. D. Shamel of the U.S.D.A. and the other by James G. France, formerly Farm Advisor of San Diego County. These accounts of the tree, and the courtesies accorded California visitors, so fired the imagination of Dr. J. R. Hurley, an Association member at La Mesa, that he wrote a letter to the President of the Association outlining steps which he felt should be taken to recognize the contribution made to California horticulture by the Le Blanc family. These suggestions were carried out practically in their entirety by the Association.

A committee consisting of Dr. J. Eliot Coit, Chairman, Judge F. D. Halm and Carter Barrett was immediately appointed to study the plan and carry out such recommendation as it should make. Dr. Coit carried on an extensive preliminary correspondence with the American and Mexican authorities involved and it is due to the sound foundation which he laid that the whole affair was such an unqualified success. Unfortunately, after all the splendid preparatory work done by Dr. Coit, he found at the last moment that he would be unable to make the trip. This was a great disappointment to all, and the actual leadership of the party

then devolved upon Judge Halm, who handled the duties he assumed in a masterly manner. Sacrificing considerable sightseeing to make the necessary diplomatic calls and official arrangements, Judge Halm's years and simple dignity carried him through arduous rounds of contacts with Mexican officialdom in a manner reflecting great credit on his country, the Association and himself. He presided over the actual dedication ceremonies at Atlixco with unusual poise, charm and dignity.

The committee studied and planned the trip for months and the eventual presentation ceremonies closely followed the plans evolved by Dr. Coit. In the latter stage of the negotiations with those in authority in Mexico, the Association was greatly assisted by the official connections of Mr. E. L. Krushnic, the manager of the tour, who was able to save us several items of considerable expense and worry. Dr. Webber has adequately described the ceremonies and the presentation of the marker and medals so that portion of the trip will be left to his paper and this account will treat of the sightseeing and some personal impressions.

OVER THE RIO GRANDE

Mexico began with the crossing of the Rio Grande at Juarez. To many, who had never been beyond the borders of the United States, except possibly under army sponsorship, this crossing into a strange land with a different language and customs aroused mingled feelings of anticipation and doubt. In spite of a firm faith that all would be well, the current disturbing rumors abroad in the newspapers had some effect on the spirits of those concerned. How little they need have worried was soon proven by the universal courtesy, friendliness and consideration shown them by high officials, humble peons and all those they met.

Saturday afternoon and Sunday were spent in comfortable Pullmans traveling over the interesting but somewhat monotonous high desert tableland of northern Mexico. This was broken Sunday afternoon by a two-hour glimpse of a rural gathering at which vacqueros who had ridden in from great distances were entertaining themselves and friends with horse racing and such kindred sports. This unusual opportunity to see the natural rural life was much appreciated.

To those who arose early enough, the sight of statuesque Indians at the wayside stations, wrapped to the eyes in their blankets and surmounted by the always-worn great hat, the first stirrings of the awakening countryside, the workers trudging out to the fields with their hoes or shovels, the bullock carts loaded down so that the great wooden wheels creaked, the long strings of burros loaded with great bundles of wood nearly obscuring them, the driver either trotting alongside or astride the very rear end of the patient beast, his feet practically on the ground, left memories not soon to be forgotten. All this in the grey light of very early morning and then as the train slowly wound its tortuous way up the steep grades, the sun would be heralded with delicate shades of pink, yellow and lavender to leap, all too soon, full orbed above the massive peaks on the horizon.

SEE FIRST AVOCADOS

Monday noon found us in Queretaro where we had our first real Mexican meals in a provincial hotel and our first round of sightseeing in good American cars. The principal points of interest to the general tourist—the chapel where Emperor Maximilian was executed, the magnificent old Spanish aqueduct, the unique church and the first glimpse of a market place—were all covered and proved most interesting. But to the avocado enthusiasts, the trip to the Canyada, a little valley adjacent to Queretaro, where the principal planting of thin-skin avocados exists, was the high point of interest. Here, through the courtesy of some of the owners, we saw many of the trees, interspersed with cherimoyas and sapotes, many of them suffering from the heavy rains of a previous season as reported by Mr. France, and also from traces of frost damage. The leaf galls first came to our attention on these trees. According to reports there they have been observed for about five years. We found them at Atlixco on the parent Fuerte tree also.

We were met at the great station in Mexico City by Wilson Popenoe, who had come by airplane from Guatemala to be with us. This was one of the finest things that happened to many of us who knew Wilson and realized what he has meant to the avocado industry. Seven growers from Orange County joined our party here for the week we were in and about Mexico, D.F. Pine motorcars conveyed us to the Hotel Geneve for luncheon and a chance to refresh our appearance. Then a rapid tour of the city, taking in the Government Palace and Cathedral, a drive down the grand Paseo de la Reforma, two hundred feet wide, dotted with statuary in the beautiful round parks at intersections and tree lined for its entire length of three miles, which brought us to Chapultepec Park and Castle, the Presidential Palace. In the park are some of the oldest and grandest trees in the country, and the castle was the scene of the heroic resistance of the Mexican cadets to the American capture of the city by General Scott.

MEXICO'S FAMOUS "FLOATING GARDENS"

Late afternoon brought us to the floating gardens of Xochimilco. Gently poled along the winding canals in barges, with bright flowers on every hand and the soft music of zither and guitar trailing alongside, the traveler is left with an unforgettable memory and it is small wonder that Xochimilco is the favorite trysting spot of the young people from the city.

The lovely Borda gardens at Cuernavaca with their romantic pools and the mango trees, scores of years old, laden with fruit from top to bottom. The astounding murals of Diego Rivera given to the city by the late Dwight Morrow.

Dropping rapidly down to the lower elevations where true tropical conditions are first seen. Roadways lined with the scarlet beauty of the royal poinciana and lovely lavender blue of the jacaranda, fields of sugar cane, rice just being set out, bananas clustered about thatch-roofed homes and mangoes growing and fruiting luxuriantly everywhere.

Climbing again to lovely Taxco, a Spanish colonial gem, set in the wooded backgrounds of towering mountains. The quaint winding streets, the well-kept homes and shops, the lovely little plaza and, towering over all, the beautiful church, with its twin towers and tiled dome.

"SIGHTSEEING"

Back to Mexico City—the dinner for Ambassador and Mrs. Daniels— to leave the next day for Puebla and a trip through the hidden convent of Santa Monica. High Mass in the Cathedral, impressive with its vast and lofty distances. Poignant memories of the heavenly music of the boys' choir. .

On to Tehuacan with its very modern hotel and tremendous swimming pools, its bottling factory, from which the famous Garci-Crespo mineral water is distributed over all Mexico and which is a great convenience to the tourist.

Out across the high table-land of the Tierra templada to suddenly drop 8,000 feet within a half hour, over a perfectly engineered road to the valley of Cordova and the true tropics of Vera Cruz. Wandering in and out, over fair roads, through plantations of coffee, growing among bananas and other trees, to view a mountain gorge—a tremendous wooded gash between towering mountains, down which flows a vigorous mountain stream, tumbling over picturesque falls. Pretty Indian girls selling gardenias and orchids in great masses for a few coppers a bunch.

HONORED BY SPECIAL "ARCH OF WELCOME"

Easter Sunday. High Mass, with reverent beauty in the great cathedral at Puebla. The trip over fine roads to Atlixco. A specially constructed "Arch of Welcome" at the city gates. The Mayor, the army officers, the townspeople, with beautiful Mexican flags; the small school girls, in white dresses, holding the plush case with the huge key to the city (as a gift) and, not least, the myriad photographers, all drawn up in a welcoming crescent.

Returning to Mexico City from Atlixco in the dusk of Easter Sunday evening, the hours glide rapidly by in absorbing conversation with young "Bill Krome", who made a special trip from Florida to participate in the ceremonies. As we surmount the eleven-thousand-foot-elevation before dropping into the valley of Mexico, a forest fire is flickering away in the pines and the smoke is heavy in our nostrils. The army fights fires, but not too efficiently, evidently.

Monday morning sees us visiting the revered shrine of Guadalupe with its miraculous painting of the Virgin, and then on to the pyramids of San Juan Teotihuacan. First, the museum with its pottery and stone treasures unearthed in the excavations, then the great quadrangle of the temple of Quetzalcoatl, more than four city blocks in extent, surrounded by massive walls broken by minor pyramids. At the rear, as we enter, stands the excavated stone pyramid of the Aztec period and immediately behind it the partially excavated pyramid of the

Toltec period with its awesome winged serpent heads.

CLIMB THE GREAT "PYRAMID OF THE SUN"

Five of the hardier members of the party find energy to climb the great Pyramid of the Sun, greater in bulk than that of Cheops in Egypt and only slightly lower. From its flat summit, a magnificent view of the valley of Anahuac is had, with the lesser and slightly excavated Pyramid of the Moon in the immediate foreground and in the middle background looking in the opposite direction, the great temple quadrangle. The flights of stone steps leading to the summit are very steep in places and the surface of the pyramid is roughened by rocks, inset in the surface at a variety of angles. It does not take much imagination to visualize the gorgeously costumed processions of priests winding up these pyramids with their sacrificial victims for the last savage rites on the summit.

Luncheon in the hotel in Mexico City—a brief interlude of free time to spend strolling or in the shops—then the gracious reception by Ambassador and Mrs. Daniels at the American Embassy, with its lovely garden and appointments. Whisked to the railroad, evening finds us on the road to Guadalajara.

Tuesday morning finds us under the clear, azure skies of Guadalajara, one of the finest cities in all Mexico. In the center of a very rich agricultural district, relatively free from many of the civil troubles of the country, enjoying a superb climate. Guadalajara immediately impresses the visitor with its well being.

GOVERNMENTAL ORPHANAGE—FLOWERS EVERYWHERE

A rapid tour of the town before luncheon disclosed one of the most remarkable government orphanages existing anywhere. Converted from an old monastery, with twenty-eight outdoor patios, with flowers growing everywhere, cleanliness is paramount. The great kitchen with colonial equipment is so scrupulously clean that there is absolutely no odor of any sort. As the visitors stroll from patio to patio, they are greeted by beautiful, bright-faced children who make the echoes ring with their lusty voices raised in native songs. Tiny tots of kindergarten age are led by a four-year-old primadonna—irresistible appeal to the heart strings. Here, one feels, some of the younger generation are at least getting a chance.

Then we are whisked up and down long streets of magnificent residences, framed in perfect lawns and exotic flowers. With the jacarandas and poincianas at their height and many flowering shrubs and plants at their peak, which we did not even recognize, the residential avenues for sheer loveliness surpassed anything imagined.

A rapid visit to the famed glass blowers and an interesting entertainment at the Tlaquepaque pottery works where Tonala Indians decorated freehand, as we watched, left a number of hours for shopping, strolling or what one most desired.

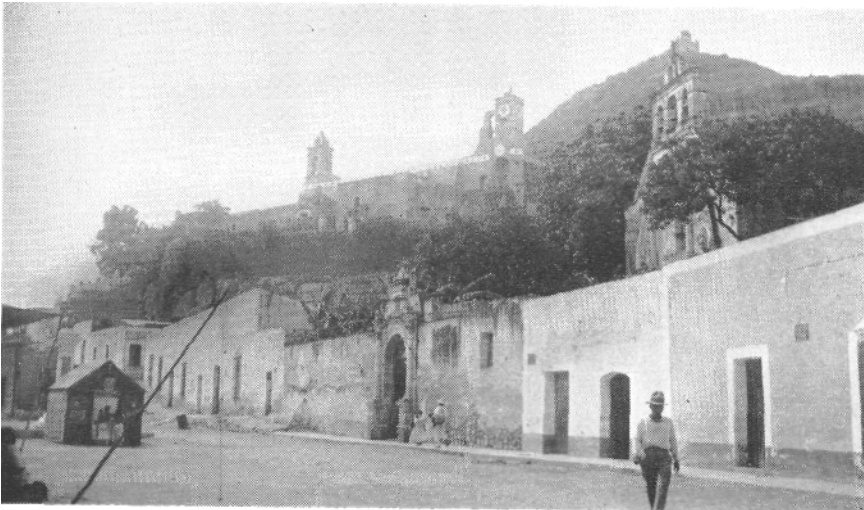
THE FAMED BARRANCAS—AND THE WEST COAST

Wednesday on the train again, this time the Sud Pacifico de Mexico, over the famous Barrancas—tremendous gorges crossed by spidery trestles from which one looked down thousands of feet to red roofed villages nestling along some small streams—a marvelous feat of engineering. Alongside, jagged, tumbled masses of glasslike black lava.

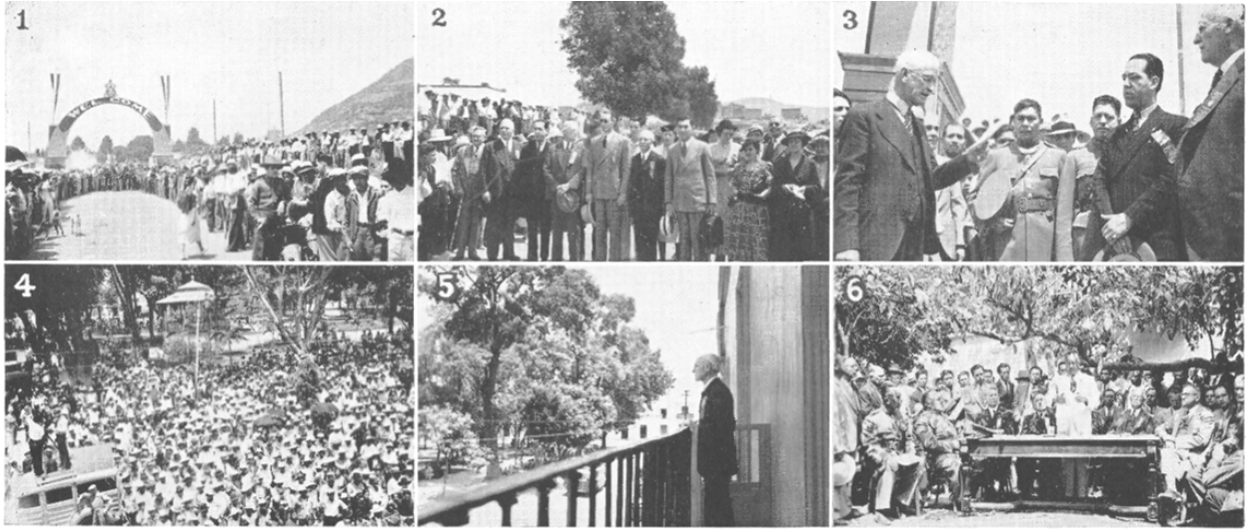
Thursday at Mazatlan with all its purely tropical flavor. A magnificent harbor framed in hills with the blue water foaming at their rocky base on the seaward side. An all-too-short motor-boat trip to the Coconut Isle where the refreshing milk of the fresh nuts is drunk from the shell after they are beheaded by the deft machete in the hands of a native - the fascinating demonstration of how to "walk" up, and then down, a coconut tree by a barefoot native. An interesting ride up the hills to the meteorological station and then down through the quaint fishing village where the children at every turn smilingly wave the one greeting they know in English, "Good bye". An afternoon free for shopping and other recreation with the picturesque memory of those two comrades, Dr. Webber and Professor Home, hugely enjoying a drive in the quaint two-wheeled cart or araña (Spider). A last fling at Mexican music and entertainment in the lovely Hotel Belmar. facing the ocean front and the sun, a gorgeous red ball, setting in the ocean to be followed by all the vivid tints of a tropical sunset.

Saturday, going through the customs of Nogales and realizing how good it is to be an American and home in one's own accustomed surroundings again, in spite of a wonderful trip and fascinating sights seen on every hand.

Mexico, Hasta Luego!



Street in Atlixco leading to LeBlanc garden, which is about a block above this point.



1. Atlixcoans at Arch of Welcome. 2. Association party at Arch of Welcome. 3. Mayor Cuevas extending official welcome. 4. Crowd in plaza, Atlixco, during official reception at Palacio Municipal. 5. Prof. Wm. T. Horne on balcony at Palacio Municipal, Atlixco. 6. Governor Camacho of Puebla delivering his address at ceremonies.