

Recognition of the 75th Anniversary: Commemoration and Commitment

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Our Society is now seventy-five years young ... a venerable age for any organization. Happy Birthday! As I put this presentation together, I came to the daunting conclusion that the history of our Society is not very marketable. You will never read about it in the headlines of the "Inquirer" at the supermarket checkout. In reality, it is mostly a record of dedicated volunteerism and of getting results through others; and that does not make headlines. Former president James G. France once characterized the Society as "a stand-by organization for the avocado industry — ready to take up industry problems as they come up and do what it can to help solve them." It certainly has been that, but where's the "sizzle?"

Nevertheless, I want to share with you my selection of a few historically significant events—dwelling more on the early years and skipping lightly through the later ones.

Let us start at the beginning, with a quotation from the published records:

"Through the efforts of Mr. Victor W. Killick of Glendale, California, and Mr. J. J. Crafton of Los Angeles, California, a meeting of the ahuacate growers of southern California was held in the Assembly Room of the Alexandria Hotel, Los Angeles, on May 14, 1915, at 10 o'clock A.M.

"The object of the meeting, as outlined by Mr. Killick, was to form an association of the ahuacate growers of southern California for the purpose of preventing the infant industry falling into the errors which the citrus growers of California had experienced in the starting of their industry, and to concentrate their efforts to accomplish results with the best economy by disseminating cultural information to the members of the proposed association, and to make an effort to educate the public—their future consumers—on the food value of the ahuacate."

An organization was formed and a board of directors was elected. Two controversies arose and were settled: (1) should this be the "ahuacate" association or the "avocado" association, and (2) should the plural of avocado be standardized as "-does" or as "-dos?" Debate was spirited. "Avocado" prevailed over "ahuacate" and there was agreement that avocado should be pluralized by the addition of only an "s." Edwin G. Hart was elected by the directors to be the Association's first president. (Our current president, Victor Pankey, is our thirty-ninth.) Headquarters was established in the Union Oil Building in Los Angeles.

Membership in 1915 was 74. Of the natural charter members, none lives today. Only Armstrong Nurseries, of the corporate charter members, survives. Messrs. Killick and Crafton quietly slipped into historical oblivion, not to be heard from again in our industry.

The first semi-annual meeting of the new Association was held October 23, 1915. President Hart announced that "the purpose of the Association is the improvement of the culture, production, and marketing of the ahuate." "

On display at that meeting were a great variety of thin-skinned avocados (mostly seedlings) and a few budded trees—then something of a rarity. Also exhibited was a box of thin-skinned avocados that had been shipped to Chicago and back and still were sound. At mid-day, there was a display, with samples, of avocado dishes of all kinds. Recipe folders were distributed. One recipe that tempts me was for a dessert: avocado and chopped dates beaten in whipped cream slightly sweetened.

President Hart described the Association's functions. Some were these:

Obtain publicity.

Protect the public against promotions like those that made crazes of raising eucalyptus and spineless cactus.

Compile statistics.

Distribute 10,000 recipe folders during the year.

Promote the keeping of tree production records.

A resolution was adopted asking the Secretary of Agriculture to send an agricultural explorer to Central America, Mexico, and South America "to secure and import all varieties of the avocado that can be obtained." The Association's second president was Dr. H. J. Webber, director of the University of California's Citrus Experiment Station at Riverside. The university's service to the avocado industry which we have just recognized with our medal of honor began very early, indeed.

President Webber reported in 1916 that collection, publication, and dissemination of data regarding the growing of avocados was the main work of the Association, but ... "soon the industry will be confronted with the problem of marketing many hundred times the quantity of fruit now marketed. To dispose successfully of the increasing quantities of fruit means that a campaign of advertising must be carried on, and the Association is the only organized agency having this as one of its main functions." The program of the 1916 meeting included papers on the by-products of the avocado, market value of the fruit, chemical constituents of the avocado, and marketing obstacles and problems — the same kinds of things we talk about in 1990.

At the 1917 meeting of members, President Shedden urged that energetic measures be taken to strengthen the use of the name "avocado" to free the fruit from the misnomer, "alligator pear." He moved that a committee be formed to send out circular letters to hotels and dining cars urging their adoption of "avocado." Member C. P. Taft protested also against the practice of the Los Angeles Times of not only always calling the fruit "alligator pear," but also of placing it among the vegetables.

In 1919, the Association's president proposed eliminating semi-annual meetings in favor of meeting annually with the California Fruit Growers. The proposed alliance did not happen, but semi-annual meetings did give way to our present practice of annual meetings.

At the 1920 meeting, Director A. F. Yaggy made these comments in an address:

"It is evident that unless we could make some satisfactory arrangement with a

distributing organization already established, such as California Fruit Growers Exchange ... we shall have to take prompt and definite steps towards creating a marketing organization of our own. ... It has been suggested that for the present ... we should select a good jobber in each city where we want to introduce our fruit, give him our support and assurance of the benefits ... arising from his missionary work, work with him to educate the trade, and advertise to create a demand at times when the crop is heaviest."

The Association formed a marketing department in 1921 and entered into an agreement with American Fruit Growers, Inc. to do the marketing. Contracts were made between the Association and its individual members. The marketing venture failed, according to President William Sallmon, because the scheme was premature, the crop was very light and too few members accepted the contract, but chiefly, he said, "because the preliminary work necessary to success had not been thoroughly done, namely, to instill in the minds of the growers a will to cooperate."

By 1923, the Association had recruited a young man, George B. Hodgkin, to be its paid half-time secretary and manager with the responsibility of forming a marketing cooperative of avocado growers. The time had come. In 1922, 150,000 pounds had been marketed; the 1923 crop was estimated to be 560,000 pounds — nearly four times more.

The cooperative was organized in August 1923, as the California Avocado Growers Exchange. It was incorporated January 21, 1924; and on February 15, it took over from the Association the business of handling avocados. Since marketing was no longer a function of the Association, the by-laws were amended in November to delete "marketing" from the statement of the Association's purposes.

The relationship between the Association and the Exchange (which was renamed Calavo Growers of California in 1927) continued close for a number of years, but gradually each went its own way.

It became increasingly evident in the industry's early years that some sort of standardization would be needed. Immature, damaged, and low-quality windfall fruit was finding its way into the market and driving prices down. The need became crystal clear at the very beginning of the new cooperative's existence when a flood of windfall fruit temporarily wrecked the market.

The Association's board in 1923 asked the Legislature to include avocado in the State Fruit and Vegetable Standardization Law, but the effort was unsuccessful. The request was successfully repeated in 1925, and a maturity standard of 8% oil content in avocados became effective August 25, 1925 —65 years ago.

I have dwelt on these first few years in some detail because they were the formative period for all that has come after. For the rest of this review, there is only time to flit through the years, highlighting some of the developments.

In 1931, President J. Eliot Coit expressed concern that the Avocado Departments of the Farm Bureaus in several counties were gradually taking over avocado production activities previously in the domain of the Association. He suggested that the roles of each of the parties be defined, with the Association's role being to work on the tariff

matter, quarantines, standardization, legislation, laboratory research, and variety studies especially with regard to marketability.

By 1933, the competition between the Association and the Farm Bureau Avocado Departments had become so great that the effectiveness of the Association was endangered. A meeting of farm advisors and leaders from both organizations cooled the crisis by more clearly defining the functions of each of the competitors.

Fostering research was a prominent function of the Association from its beginning days, as it still is. At the 1932 annual meeting, for instance, President Albert Thille reported that the Association was working with three universities and four orphanages in investigations of the chemical, biological, and clinical place of avocados in the cure of diseases as well as in the normal diet. He mentioned particularly a project of feeding avocado to anemic children.

Cuban avocado imports were a major concern at that time. President Thille told about the Association's work in collecting data and preparing a brief calling for a tariff on avocado imports, for submission to the Congress. A tariff of 15 cents per pound was established, but it was almost useless because of an exemption period. The problem was pursued for a number of years until at last its importance faded away.

Fruit theft has been a problem since our industry began. It was a big problem in the early 1930s. The association formed a special committee in 1934 to confer with district attorneys and county councils in Los Angeles and Orange Counties toward enactment of ordinances giving peace officers greater authority to search suspicious vehicles, and setting a lower value to qualify fruit theft as a felony. Results were good — for a while, at any rate.

In 1937, the Association began the accumulation of historical data and publications to be deposited with the Division of Subtropical Horticulture of the University of California. Some years later, the materials were transferred to UC/Riverside, where they still are. Unfortunately, the material is no longer a separate collection.

Under the aegis of the Association, 38 men and women traveled to Mexico in 1938 to mark the original Fuerte avocado tree and to honor its owner. It was in that year that the Society started its practice of awarding medals of honor for outstanding and meritorious service to the avocado industry.

In 1939, the members of the Association in annual meeting were addressed by Mr. John T. Pickett, editor of the *Pacific Rural Press*—or, as we know it today, *California Farmer*. Now here we are today, 51 years later, privileged to hear from the present editor of that illustrious publication. Is this history repeating?

On the occasion of the Association's 25th anniversary, 1940, a paper by Dr. Vincent Wager was published in the Yearbook. It was a milestone paper, for in it, Dr. Wager "officially" identified *Phytophthora cinnamomi* as the causal organism of avocado root rot, and we knew our enemy.

Often, the California Avocado Association and Calavo Growers of California — also commonly called the **association** — were confused in the minds of growers and others. Since the two organizations were not equally idolized, it seemed desirable to make the distinction clearer. Accordingly, in 1941, the members of the Association changed the

name of the organization to California Avocado Society. In 1974, we incorporated, and our last name became "Inc."

In the decades since we became the "Society," our leaders have pursued the missions of production research, varieties development, and grower information. With small grants from limited financial resources, the Society has very effectively catalyzed important work toward the solution of root rot and other avocado diseases, the control of pests, and the improvement of avocado culture generally. Much of this work would never have been undertaken at all, except for the Society's goading.

Among other activities, the Society involved itself in foreign exploration (mostly at the personal expense of the explorers) and cooperative variety trials and research test plots and publication of information through papers, newsletters, and yearbooks. The 73 Yearbooks our organization has published in particular represent an unique and extraordinary knowledge resource. A couple of years ago, Director-at-Large Sanchez Colin reported to us that our Yearbooks added up to 11,725 pages. I accept his count without challenge.

A second goodwill pilgrimage to Mexico was sponsored by the Society in 1948, to plant a California-grown Fuerte tree at the site of the dead parent tree, thus returning to Mexico a treasure it had lost. One hundred twenty-seven "pilgrims" were in that party.

It was in the 1940s, also, that the Society organized an industry wide production research committee, one product of which is the kind of researcher-producer communication that we enjoyed yesterday.

In the 1950s, the Society was instrumental in obtaining the allocation of land at the newly-opened South Coast Field Station of the University of California for avocado variety work. The value of that fine field laboratory to our industry is incalculably great.

During the decade of the '50s, the Society slightly shifted its direction and began a program aimed at *reducing* the number of avocado varieties being grown — a worthy effort, considering that some 150 varieties were then accounting for only about two percent of the crop. Emphasis was on registration of new varieties (for control purposes) and topworking of varieties found wanting.

In 1957, the Society, working with the California Farm Bureau, opened a campaign for voluntary funding of intensified root rot research—at a suggested dollar per acre. The results were modest by today's standards, but the considerable amount of money that came in significantly and positively stimulated research efforts. There was a similar campaign a few years later.

The Society's board was enlarged by the members in 1967 to allow the seating of three directors-at-large from outside California. Our international influence was becoming clearly more evident.

The following year, a Nurserymen's Section was created within the Society with added benefits to the industry expected and realized.

We had a "first" in 1977. The first (and so far, only) female president of the Society was elected by the board: Lois Todd. Life has not been the same since! Actually, we had *two* firsts: not only did we have our first woman president, but we had our first "dynasty," as

husband Ted Todd had also served as president, in 1962-64. I should add that both have been awarded the Society's medal of honor for outstanding and meritorious service to the industry. Both are still among us, making things happen.

In 1978, the Society and the University of California entered into an agreement calling for the sale of G-6 avocado wood through the Society with a royalty included. A small part of the royalty income is retained by the Society; the major portion goes to the university to fund research. The arrangement was later expanded to include G-755 material.

A membership benchmark was achieved in 1979, at 2,023. It appeared that the Society was on a roll. Unfortunately, that support was not sustained, and the level has fallen now to only a little over half of the record figure. A pity.

A major forward step in the Society's history occurred in 1984 when the California Avocado Commission asked the Society to oversee and manage its industry-funded production research program. Once again I refer to yesterday's program, this time to point with pride to what has been accomplished under the Society's guidance and, in particular, research controller Harry Griffith's effective work.

That brings us almost to today, which will be tomorrow's history. There is much more that could be said, and perhaps should be said, to make the story complete. Another time. Another place. Another historian.

What about the "commitment" part of the title of these remarks? That part is short and easy. We were given a clear road map this morning. Commitment will open it up for us to follow.

So long as this industry provides men and women of the kind and caliber, and with the resolute dedication of your present board of directors; so long as the people who benefit provide *adequate* membership support for this Society and its goals and programs; and so long as enough of us individually and collectively take an interest in what is happening in our industry and personally help to make it better, we will have a Society that is committed enduringly to achievement and progress.

That is what it is all about, isn't it?