Dr. Gerald W. Olson—A Memorial Tribute

Kenneth R. Olson and Chris J. Johannsen

Dr. Gerald W. Olson was born on Mar. 22, 1932 in Gothenburg, NE. He attended the Univ. of Nebraska and received a B.S. in Agriculture in 1954 and an M.S. in soil microbiology in 1959. He then worked in Wisconsin on the soil survey in Florence and Menominee Counties while studying soil genesis and morphology at the Univ. of Wisconsin. In 1962, he was awarded a Ph.D. for his thesis work under the direction of Dr. Francis D. Hole. From 1962 to 1967, Dr. Olson worked for Cornell University as a soil technologist. In 1967, he was promoted to assistant professor and in 1972 to associate professor of soil science in resource development. In 1972, he served as a senior consultant for the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) in Italy and Iran. In 1973, he worked as a visiting professor at the Kansas Geological Survey in Manhattan, KS. In 1976, he was a consultant for the Soil Conservation Authority in Victoria, Australia and in 1979 he went to Washington DC to work for SCS as a soil scientist. During 1986, he was a consultant for FAO in India and a visiting professor at Ohio State Univ. in Columbus.

Olson died Oct. 31, 1987 in Dayton, OH. He is survived by his wife, Mary, a minister in the United Theological Seminary in Dayton, OH and by his three sons, Brad, Dave, and Eric. He was active in many professional and honor societies and received numerous awards including Fellow in both the Soil and Water Conservation Society of America and the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Olson was one of the first soil scientists to have impact on nonagricultural uses of soil maps and survey publications. In 1964, Olson published Cornell Memoir 387 entitled "Applications of Soil Survey to Problems of Health, Sanitation, and Engineering" which became a classic among many professionals using soil surveys. Until then, everyone had been telling engineers, planners, and home owners that septic systems would not work on certain soils. His approach was to point out the problems using those soils and to show how to overcome these limitations.

Olson had the responsibility for distribution of newly released soil survey publications in the state of New York. His ideas and effective approaches for the distribution of these valuable documents led land-use specialists in other states to adopt his methods. He also organized tours for government officials, resource specialists, and other individuals to improve their understanding of the importance of considering soils when making land-use decisions. He believed much of the adverse environmental impact of many land-use decisions could be reduced or eliminated if land users were initially aware of the soil limitations and capabilities.

Olson conducted a research program that strongly supported his teaching, extension, and service efforts. His results have contributed greatly to understanding soil as a natural body and its influences on both farm and urban uses. Graduate studies, under his direction, were designed to utilize soil properties to


1 Assistant professor of pedology (not a relative but a former Ph.D. student), Dep. of Agronomy, Univ. of Illinois, Urbana, IL 61081, and professor of agronomy and director, Natural Resources Res. Inst., Purdue Univ., West Lafayette, IN 47907.