In Memoriam—Leland H. Gile, Jr.
(2/23/1920-11/16/2009)

John Hawley, Robert Grossman, and Curtis Monger

Leland H. (Lee) Gile, international authority on aridland soils and longtime resident of Las Cruces, New Mexico, died of natural causes on November 16, 2009 at La Posada, Mesilla Valley Hospice in Las Cruces. He was 89 years old. Lee Gile was born on February 23, 1920 in Alfred, Maine and grew up on the family dairy farm, where he developed a lifelong passion for the natural landscape and earth science. After early Soil Conservation Service (SCS) work, he served in the U.S. Army Air Force as an airplane armorer from 1942 to 1945, with overseas WWII posts in England and France. At that time he met his future wife, Dora M. Blossom, of Turner, Maine, who was serving as a WAC airplane engineering mechanic. Lee and Dora were married soon after the war and were constant companions for the next 46 years until she passed away in 1992.

Lee Gile’s academic career started at the University of New Hampshire with an undergraduate degree in soil science, and he returned to work for the USDA Soil Conservation Service, partly at the Harvard University Forest Research Center. His budding research career continued at the University of Wisconsin, where he earned his Master’s degree, with major and minor specialties in soil science and Quaternary geology, respectively. Lee’s research advisor was Dr. Francis Hole. His thesis was on soils of a glaciated landscape in central Wisconsin, and it was soon published by the Soil Science Society of America (1955). It was the first of more than 45 peer-reviewed research papers published in major scientific journals during the next 50 years of his career. He had just started his Ph.D. research at Cornell University when he was invited by the Chief of the SCS Soil Survey Division to lead the soil science phase of a new field study of desert soils and geomorphology that was headquartered at New Mexico State University (NMSU) in Las Cruces. At 37, Lee was very pleased to be able to escape from academia and to start a very productive research career in the arid and semiarid regions of the American Southwest. Besides work in south-central New Mexico, he had temporary assignments with the SCS at Texas Tech in Lubbock and the Fort Worth Technical Service Center from 1971 to 1977.

The official name of the cooperative Federal and State program at NMSU was the Desert Soil-Geomorphology Project, with active USDA-SCS involvement from 1957 to 1977, the year of Lee Gile’s retirement. However, his active research career in the area continued through the summer of 2009, with his closest collaborators including Dr. Robert B. Grossman (retired) of the USDA-NRCS National Soil Survey Center, Professor K.H. Turner (retired, formerly soil survey chief) at New Mexico Tech, and Larry Wilding, Dan Yaalon, Leland Gile, René Tavernier, Bill Johnson, and B.L. Allen.

Of the approximately 45 publications, six are species-soil relations. Lee was meticulous in finding of various plants and their characteristics at various range sites with and without grazing was particularly expressed zones strongly expressed zones to soil survey and geomorphic-mapping practices in arid and semiarid regions. In 1983, Soils and Geomorphology in the Southern New Mexico—Guidebook to the Desert Project as New Mexico Bureau of Mines (Geology) Memoir 39, received the prestigious Kirk Bryan Award of the Geological Society of America, recognition of distinguished contribution to geomorphology. A summary of Desert Project research was recently published by the New Mexico Bureau of Mines and Geology, Agricultural Experiment State as Bulletin 798 (see http://cahe.nmsu.edu/pubs/research/weather_climate/BL798_2009). It includes reviews the major publications as principal author.