



Lost Resources – Gary E. Larson

August 27, 1950 – June 26, 2020

A precious resource and great friend of those who love and work in rangelands was lost when Dr. Gary E. Larson passed away on the morning of June 27, 2020 at the age of 69. Gary was a proud and loving husband to wife, Pam, and father of son Ross and daughter Alyssa. His full obituary can be viewed at: <https://www.eidsnessfuneralhome.com/obituary/gary-larson>. Gary was Professor Emeritus in the Natural Resources Department at South Dakota State University. Throughout his 36-year career as professor at SDSU, Gary taught taxonomy to thousands of students and was the director and curator of the C.A. Taylor Herbarium. Even after retirement, Gary provided taxonomic assistance to others and volunteered in the herbarium to continue the work of digitizing the collection.

Gary was a gifted, world-class botanist. He generously shared his deep knowledge of the flora of the Northern Great Plains and the Black Hills of South Dakota with students, colleagues, friends, and the public. He co-authored two books with his friend and colleague, James R. Johnson (Professor Emeritus, Animal and Range Sciences, SDSU): “Grassland Plants of South Dakota and the Northern Great Plains” and “Plants of the Black Hills and Bear Lodge Mountains”. These books are the “go-to” rangeland plant ID guides for thousands of professionals and amateurs, filled with beautiful photographs and information for identifying and learning the history and uses of plants in the Northern Great Plains. A dog-eared copy of one or both can be found on the dash, seat, or glovebox of nearly every agency and ranch pickup truck in the region.

Gary was one of the great teachers of our time. His taxonomy courses required considerable hard work and study; he expected much from his students. Many of them felt that those were the hardest courses that they took in their degree programs. However, they absolutely loved Gary. Tributes have poured in from former students describing his kindness, caring, and willingness to help students learn. He stayed late and kept the lab and teaching herbarium open for students needing extra time to master the identification clues and scientific names of the plants in his courses. He proudly followed their careers and became a mentor and friend to them, still teaching and providing ID help long after they graduated. There are many rangeland managers, rangeland management agency personnel, field botanists, wildlife biologists, and others who owe their plant ID skills and love of grassland plants to Gary Larson.

Gary was, for decades, the coach for the SDSU Range Plant ID team that competed at SRM meetings. His teams were always well prepared and very competitive, with over 50% of them placing in the top 5 and 25% in the top 3 teams in the international contest. Gary has been remembered by the other Plant ID coaches as a respected teacher, mentor, colleague, and friend. “He was humble, but extremely prepared and full of knowledge...and his name is pretty darned prominent in the SRM Plant ID contest Herbarium...he was one of a very few who took the time to challenge other students through the contest” (Barry Irving, U. of Alberta). Many of his students and colleagues continue to stand in awe of his skill, dedication, and successes in teaching students to know and identify rangeland plants.

Gary was also a great teacher and resource for his many friends and colleagues throughout the region. “He was unendingly generous with his time and knowledge” (K.C. Jensen, SDSU). So many of us would

send him our “unknowns” either as a physical specimen or in a photo (the plants were usually pretty battered and dried up and photos were often poor quality) for help in identification. He always responded, providing common and scientific names (at least to genus, and often to species if the specimen wasn’t too badly mangled). He also gave us information on key features to help with future identification and to distinguish plants from similar species. His death leaves a huge hole for many of us and “represents a huge loss to our botanical community and beyond” (Maribeth Latvis, SDSU).

Gary Larson will not only be remembered as a great taxonomist, scientist, colleague, and teacher; he will also be remembered by so many as a kind, humble, caring, positive, and genuine friend. His death still stuns us, and his loss leaves a hole in many hearts. Every time we identify the plants we see as we walk through the prairies and hills we think of Gary and thank him for the great gift that he gave us of his knowledge and friendship. Rest in peace Gary, in God’s loving arms. We will miss you.