

Elbert Luther Little, Jr. Oklahoma Scientist of the Year

A botanist who began in Oklahoma and achieved an international reputation.

Elbert L. Little, Jr., who joined the Oklahoma Academy of Science as a student in 1925 and presented a paper at the 1926 meeting, was awarded the 1992 Scientist of the Year Award. Dr. Little was born in Fort Smith, AR on October 15, 1907, to Elbert Luther (a railroad tax agent) and Josephine (Conner) Little. The family migrated with baby sister, Josephine, to Muskogee, OK in 1909. Elbert Jr. is proud to be an "Okie from Muskogee" where he graduated from high school in 1923 and was a member of the National Honor Society. He attended Muskogee Junior College in 1923-24 and had his first biology course as a summer field course in Colorado taught by McPherson College of Kansas in 1924. Three years' study at the University of Oklahoma resulted in a B.A. in botany in 1927.

His graduate studies began at the University of Michigan Biological Station in 1927. He spent the next two years at the University of Chicago, where he majored in botany, specializing in plant ecology with Professors Henry C. Cowles and George D. Fuller. During the summer of 1928 he participated in an ecology course with Dr. Cowles at Utah State University. In 1929 he received both the M.S. (March) and the Ph.D. (December), both in botany from the University of Chicago. Both theses were on studies of Oklahoma plants.

Elbert worked for the Oklahoma Forest Commission in Broken Bow during 1930. He has a phenomenal memory for people and incidents, e.g., some 50 years after the Broken Bow work he returned to the area and found many of his experimental plots. He taught at Southwestern State College in Weatherford from 1930 to 1933. In 1932 he was awarded a B.S. in zoology by the University of Oklahoma and in 1933 he studied education at Northeastern Oklahoma State University. For 8 years he was a forest ecologist with the USDA Forest Service based in Tucson, AZ. He researched poisonous range plants, watershed management, and pinyon-juniper woodlands in New Mexico and Arizona. In 1942 he moved to Washington, DC where he was a dendrologist with the U.S. Forest Service for 34 years. A dendrologist is a tree identification specialist or forest botanist. He was the chief dendrologist from 1967 to 1975. He found about 50 new tropical tree species; some of which he named.

On August 14, 1943, Elbert married Ruby Rema Rice. Ruby is a research botanist, retired from the Agricultural Research Service of the Department of Agriculture. They have three children: Gordon Rice, Melvin Weaver, and Alice Conner (Mrs. Ronald E. Mannan).

Everyone significantly involved with forestry has been influenced by Little. People are eager to talk with him. His contributions are widely appreciated.

Elbert has written some 23 books, with more in the mill, and more than 150 handbooks, bulletins, and articles. His work has covered trees from the Arctic of Alaska to the tropics of Central and South America and the Caribbean and Hawaiian islands. The books include a five-volume atlas series on trees of the United States. The books are not just in English but also in Spanish, a language in which Little is fluent. Two of his books, the Audubon Society *Field Guide to North American Trees* (Eastern and



Dr. Little and the award.

Western Regions, published by Knopf), have sold 1,024,315 copies (as of 7/29/93) and are still available in bookstores. He revised *Forest Trees of Oklahoma* in 1981.

Little served as the U.S. forestry representative on the International Commission for the Nomenclature of Cultivated Plants (1956-75) and was editor of the International Code of Nomenclature of Cultivated Plants. He served as a visiting professor at VPI (1966-67), University of District of Columbia (1979), Universidad de Los Andes at Mérida, Venezuela (1953-54), Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza at Turrialba, Costa Rica (1964-65 and 1967), and taught a short course in Nicaragua (1971). The United Nations used his services with the Food and Agriculture Organization in Mexico (1960), Ecuador (1965, 1975), and Nicaragua (1971). He also consulted with the Oklahoma Forestry Division.

This glimpse of a few highlights of Little's career establish his worthiness for the award. Other awards include: Superior Service Award (1960), Distinguished Award (1973) and 40-year Federal Service Award (1974) from the USDA, Outstanding Award from the U.S. Forest Service, the Ortenburger Award from the University of Oklahoma, the Professional Achievement Award from the University of Chicago, the Distinguished Service Award from the American Forestry Association, an award from the Oklahoma Forestry Association for 50 years of Dedication to Forestry in Oklahoma, and the Barrington Moore Award from the Society of American Foresters (1986).

Elbert is a man of principles and will fight for them. One example is based on a visit to Oklahoma State University where he presented a seminar to the Botany Department. He stayed at the OSU Student Union Hotel and wanted to use the honorarium check that had been given to him by OSU to pay for the room. The manager refused to take the check because "it wasn't the policy". Being logical, Elbert wondered whether the check was good since another division of the institution would not take a check issued by the bursar. He stood his ground; they finally accepted the check. He believes that some of the implementations of the endangered species act are unreasonable when a human life is balanced against hard-and-fast interpretations.

His society service and memberships include: Fellow, Society of American Foresters, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Oklahoma Academy of Science, Washington (D.C.) Academy of Science, and Explorers Club; American Institute of Biological Sciences (member of governing board, 1950-60); Botanical Society of America, Ecological Society of America; Botanical Society of Washington (D.C.); American Society of Plant Taxonomists; International Society of Plant Taxonomists; California Botanical Society; Society for Economic Botany; Sociedad Botanica de Mexico; American Fern Society; American Bryological and Lichenological Society; Phi Beta Kappa; Sigma Xi; Phi Sigma; Beta Beta Beta; Southern Appalachian Botanical Society; American Forestry Association; Oklahoma Forestry Association; and International Society of Tropical Foresters.

Little continues to be productive after his "retirement?" from the Forest Service in 1975. His advice to younger scientists is to write books that will outlast you. One of the things that has changed in his life since he became a senior citizen is that some girls on the DC subway now even offer him their seats. Elbert has several projects under way and others in the planning stage. In fact, he is planning activities some 10 to 15 years in the future. Since his retirement he continues to work as a research associate with the Department of Botany, U.S. National Museum of Natural History of the Smithsonian Institution. His multifaceted career includes being a university professor, a forest ecologist, a forest botanist, a tropical dendrologist, and an author of tree books. Trees give their lives that authors may record and disseminate their thoughts.



Dr. Elbert Luther Little, Jr. in animated conversation with Dr. Hans Brisch, Chancellor of the Oklahoma State System of Higher Education.