Science Societies

In memoriam: Claude James Phene

July 9, 2025

In Memoriam

Claude James Phene
1933 — 2025



On March 10, 2025, Claude James Phene, a member of SSSA (55 years) and CSSA (48 years), passed away in Santa Fe, NM. He was born on July 11, 1933 near Bordeaux,

France and spent his formative years there before they were tragically interrupted by World War II and the deportation of his mother and grandmother when he was 10 years old. His paternal grandmother hid Claude and his brother Jacques in a small village outside of Bordeaux where they were often left alone.

Following the war, Phene returned to Bordeaux and completed secondary school and studied for his Bar-Mitzvah. Later he worked for the U.S. Army in France as a translator where he met Elizabeth Murphy. They had four children: James, Robert, Michelle, and Phillip. In 1955, Phene immigrated to the U.S. and married Elizabeth a year later. During that time, he joined the U.S. Air Force and was stationed at George AFB, Victorville, CA; he then worked at Kaiser Steel and went back to school, as his interest in soils developed, and he took a job with the USDA-ARS at the U.S. Salinity Lab in Riverside, CA. He received a B.A. in Physics and a Ph.D. in Soil Science (1970), both from the University of California–Riverside.

Beginning an illustrious career in agricultural and water research, Phene was transferred to Florence, SC for eight years and then to Fresno, CA and the Water Management Research Lab (1978) where he worked until his retirement from USDA in 1994. He pioneered much of the work in drip irrigation and particularly in subsurface drip irrigation for commercial agriculture. His colleagues referred to Phene as visionary who was forward looking and way ahead of his time. They also noted how he forged ahead when others said it was not worthwhile, having later to admit that Phene proved them wrong!

In 1983, Phene married Rebecca Chavez (Becky), and they later welcomed Marcelle and Daniel to the Phene family. In “retirement,” he consulted for growers, irrigation companies, and others for nearly 20 years. He loved jazz, beaches, boating, deep-sea fishing, and many desert locales. He raced cars as a young man and later enjoyed coaching his kids in sports and listening to Marcelle and Daniel play jazz. He traveled all over the world mostly to consult or present his research, but also to see friends and family.

Phene was loved and cherished by many people, including his wife Rebecca Chavez Phene (Becky); his children, James, Robert (Filomena), Michelle (Andy McKeller), Phillip (Rachel), Marcelle (Timothy Fischer), and Daniel; his parents, Marcelle Sarah (Lowenberger) and Rolland Phene; and his brother Jacques (Danielle). He was also cherished by grandchildren, great-grandchildren, great-great grandchildren, and several nieces, nephews, brothers-in-law, and sisters-in-law.

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