Diane LaRue From southern California to Nova Scotia to the Colorado River Delta:

I was born in southern California, but have lived and worked in Nova Scotia for over 30 years. My work involves the conservation of native ecosystems, and restoration of native plant communities. In 2004, I attended a Society for Ecological Restoration and Canadian Land Reclamation conference in British Columbia. I attended sessions given by Mark Briggs on restoration in the Colorado River Delta in Mexico. I remembered my grandfather had had something to do with the Colorado and thought it would be interesting to go there for sun, warmth and experience as a volunteer for a few weeks in the winter. Mark connected me up with Francisco Zamora of the Sonoran Institute and without knowing what I was getting myself into, I found myself in Colorado River Delta (Mexico) in February of 2005 for three weeks. Since then I have returned to the Delta for several 4 - 7 month periods of time. The Delta area, with 60,000 ha of salt cedar and no river water flooding anymore, is a vast example of a completely damaged landscape with practically no original habitat left. Hoover Dam, the first large dam, changed the river forever. The complete control of Colorado River water today and the resulting massive loss of native ecosystems is due to the thinking and actions of people like my grandfather.

My grandfather was E. C. La Rue, a noted hydraulic engineer, who from 1907 to his death in 1947 dedicated his life to surveying western rivers, particularly the Colorado River, for flood control and water storage for human use. He was a member of the famous 1923 Birdseye Expedition down the Grand Canyon - the last portion of the Colorado River to be surveyed for water control. As a water conservationist he believed that rivers were to be controlled and utilized for people and he abhorred wasted water, especially through evaporation. Native ecosystems were not considered. No one at that time in western history had any idea of the devastation their policies would cause.

He died from a heart attack just after my fourth birthday. I only knew him as my grandpa and even now only vaguely remember him. Until recently I barely knew anything of what his work had been about. Last year when I found out all his papers were archived at The Huntington Library, I made arrangements to view the material. It has been fascinating for me to work with Colorado River issues while becoming familiar with my grandfather’s work. From that I have come to an understanding of what his legacy is to me in terms of my lifelong interests and beliefs and to the environment of many western rivers.

All my life I have loved plants and enjoyed working with them. I am fascinated with why they grow where they do, how they live in community, how they exist in different conditions and what their roles are in their ecosystems. I believe in conservation and protection of natural systems. In disturbed sites, I practice habitat conservation and restoration. He hated waste, so do I, but we have different definitions of waste. We both value plants - crops for him, native plants for me. He used engineered structures to control water; I use plant material to control erosion. Most important, the same commitment, passion and enthusiasm my grandfather had for controlling rivers and building dams, I have for conservation and restoration. Here, today in the Delta, he and I join with integrity on repairing the damage.