This sale barn near Salida, Colorado has been in business 60 years. Deane LaRue, manager, has been working there for most of her life, starting when she was 12 years old. “I’m 36 now. When I started helping, I filled water tanks and helped feed. There were several years I wasn’t down there very much while I was in college. Then I started working there more, and then they needed someone to manage it,” she says.

The owner, Larry Hughes, passed away with cancer. “I felt like this sale barn was important; we needed it, and I didn’t want to see it go, and so I stepped up to the manager position. I had a partner for a couple years and then he quit. The partner I have now, Pete Stagner, has been with me for the past 6 years. I’ve been managing the sale for about 10 years.

“One of our big selling points that makes our sale barn special is the high altitude calves we get. We call ourselves the home of high altitude calves. Nearly all the calves that come through here are sired by bulls that were PAP tested, and some are out of PAP tested cows also. They are good, hardy calves that can go on and do well anywhere,” says LaRue. They grew up in tough conditions and will thrive in any conditions; it’s a lot easier for cattle raised at high altitude to do well in a lower elevation feedlot than it is for low elevation cattle to do well at higher altitude.

“We have cattle coming here to be sold that have lived their whole lives above 9000 feet. We are located right in the middle of the mountains, in central Colorado. My home place here, near Salida, is 7600 feet. We pull cattle in here from the Gunnison area, San Luis Valley, Jefferson, and all the regions around us,” she says.

“We are not a big sale barn; we’re a small operation. Superior has really hurt the local small sale barns.” Ranchers really need the local auctions, however, because not everyone can sell through the video markets—especially if they only have a few cattle.

“A few big ranches have stuck with us and bring their cattle here, but the majority of our bigger outfits have gone to selling their calves with Superior. We sell a lot of cattle from people who have anywhere from just 10 or 12 head to someone who runs 60 head. It’s hard to keep the doors open when you are selling just a handful of calves. We still get a lot of cull cows and bulls, but that’s only because no one can sell butcher cattle through Superior.” People always need a market for those cattle, and can’t afford to lose the local sale barns. Our industry wouldn’t survive without the small auctions.

“People lose sight of how important they are. If this shuts down, where will they haul those 2 or 3 cows, or that bull that gets injured in the middle of summer?” With the price of fuel a person can’t afford to haul them very far, especially if you have just 1 or 2 animals instead of a trailer load.

“We are probably one of the only sale barns that has no computer system. We still do everything by hand. The cards are taken from the block to the office and everything is hand done. Computer systems are expensive. We’ve been looking into them, and we’ve found a few that we thought we could use, but it’s hard to find one that you can get the brands into. We are still pretty old school, and it may take awhile for people to get their check because they have to wait for everything to go through and for everyone in the office to do their part in it, and all the paperwork,” says LaRue.

People don’t seem to mind, however. It gives the local guys a chance to sit and visit. Sale barns are a place where you can actually get to see your friends and neighbors once in awhile. “We have a little café here, and a gal who cooks some really good hamburgers. It’s gotten to the point where the public comes here to eat hamburger! It’s a place to socialize and have a good meal,” she says.
Vaccination Program

“I am excited about a new program we’ve started—and we are the first sale barn in Colorado to do this. We started our own vaccination program, like Superior has. We have a plus program and a regular program in which the calves must have certain shots at certain times,” says LaRue.

“A lot of ranchers up here are behind the times. They don’t think there’s any need to vaccinate because their calves stay healthy; the heifers they keep never get sick. They are not exposed to other cattle, they are not drinking out of a water tank that some sick calf drank out of in the other pen, they are not getting stressed and not getting put on trucks. They stay perfectly healthy right there at home. I really push to try to convince them that they do need to vaccinate,” she says.

“I tell them they are building a reputation—either a good one or a bad one. If their cattle get sick at the feed yard, people won’t want to buy them. Today, when buyers are having to pay such high prices for calves, and their bottom line is so much higher than it used to be, they really pay attention to the health of those calves. They want to buy calves that they know are going to perform, that they know are not going to get sick.”

She talked to one of the buyers years ago when they were walking up the alley looking at calves. “He pointed to one pen of calves and told me he wouldn’t buy those calves unless he could get them at least $10 back because ‘those boogers will get sick and you’ll lose a couple of them, too.’ So I have tried really hard to get these ranchers to realize how important it is to vaccinate, and how I’ve heard the buyers talking about their calves and how they’ve gotten sick,” she says.

“We just started our vaccination program last year, and saw a sizeable difference in the prices paid between vaccinated and unvaccinated calves that came through. The price difference by far paid for the vaccine plus more. This has been one of our biggest challenges,” says LaRue.

“Up here in the mountains, vaccination is important. It’s been very important in my own cattle. At high altitude, if a calf gets sick, the chances of brisket disease shoot through the roof. And it doesn’t even have to be pneumonia. Anything that stresses them can put them over the edge,” she explains.

“I sell some registered bulls and we have a Forest permit. During the summer my cattle are at more than 12,000 feet. If a calf gets sick you’ve got to get him down out of there. We had to bring one home the other day because he got pneumonia. He hadn’t gotten brisket yet, but I knew he was going to, if he stayed up there. Any cattle that are poor doers just don’t survive up here. They have to be hardy to survive and do well, so the calves that make it to the sale barn are really hardy. But they do need to be vaccinated before they go to a feed yard,” she says.

“I vaccinate my cattle for everything because I want to do everything I can to prevent them from getting pneumonia. It will save me a lot of money in the long run. Right now, if you lose a calf you are losing between $1200 and $1700. Vaccine is cheap and it’s worth taking good care of these calves! But there are guys up here who have never given anything but 8-way, who are now giving all the respiratory vaccines. This is pretty exciting, to see this happen,” says LaRue.

“A lot of the guys here that raise Herefords are super old school and don’t vaccinate. They might vaccinate with 8-way but they are not going to vaccinate for anything that they’ve never had a problem with,” she says.

The sale barn sometimes buys calves that are on the bottom end, just to help the market. “We’ve bought some of those straight Hereford bunches, and before we could them sorted and shaped up and shipped somewhere else, we’d lose one or two. When you are only buying 15 or 20 and lose a couple, that hurts. So we are urging everyone to vaccinate their calves before they sell them.”

The Problem of Brisket Disease

“We have a buyer who runs a lot of cattle in the Jefferson area where it’s 9000 to 11,000 feet, depending on where the pasture is. He has bought a lot of cattle through Superior. One year he ended up with a semi-load of cattle that developed brisket disease. The next year he came back to us, and his cases of brisket dropped considerably, and he had maybe a trailer load of problem cattle compared to a semi load.
You are always going to see a few cattle with brisket disease because any time an animal gets pneumonia, the aveoli in the lungs get scar tissue and the heart has to work harder to pump the blood through the veins, to get it oxygenated. The blood pressure goes up, and pretty soon the animal develops congestive heart failure. That buyer came back to buying calves at our sale barn, and he was a big driving force on the vaccinations,” says LaRue. 

“He told me that if I could get these guys to vaccinate, he would give $5 more per hundredweight for their calves. He was my main encouragement. We are a small sale barn, but on those big fall runs we will outdo the biggest and best sale barns in the state. The high altitude calves are more sought after—the ones that have been PAP tested.” This is especially true now that more and more people have gone to Angus, because brisket diseases is more prevalent in Angus than some of the other breeds.

“That’s what I raise—Angus. You have to be super picky about your bloodlines. This disease is genetic, just like it is in people. Some just can’t handle high altitude. The red Angus are even worse than the black, so there are not very many red Angus influence calves around here,” she says.

**Breed Differences**

“There are many ranchers here who are really old school and have been 4 or 5 generations of raising horned Herefords. They won’t put a good black bull on those Hereford cows because they think it’s just going to ruin them! But it’s hard to beat a good crossbred. The black baldies are sought after by everybody; they make an incredible cow. Then you can use a terminal cross with a continental bull on those black baldie cows and get an excellent calf. You have an efficient cow that stays a smaller body frame, and raises a big calf. Some people don’t want to keep crossbred replacements so I tell them they can breed their very best Hereford cows AI to a really good bull, and keep going that way—breeding the rest to a black bull to make great calves for sale.”

Most people have gone to Angus, but there are still some Hereford cattle in the area. They are very efficient range cattle, and excellent for crossing. “Some of their drawbacks are pinkeye, cancer eye and chapped udders, especially up here when there’s snow on the ground and a lot of reflected sunlight. But the Hereford industry as a whole has gotten better in selecting for pigment around the eyes, and even more on the udders.”

“I bought some Hereford bulls one year to put on my commercial cows from a guy near Trinidad, and he breeds for eyelashes. These bulls had big long eyelashes that pointed down, protecting the eyes from the sun. He said in his herd pinkeye was pretty much nonexistent, and he hadn’t had a cancer eye in years. A person can select for traits that reduce these problems.” Life is just a little harder at high altitude and a person has to select cattle that can handle it—whether it’s more pigment in Herefords or less brisket disease in Angus.

**High Altitude Challenges**

Living up here requires hardy cattle and hardy people. “A lot of guys up here feed hay 6 months of the year. We had some bad snowy months this winter, and 2 feet of snow on the ground for awhile. This makes extra work, feeding cattle, plus we have a lot of wildlife problems. Bears aren’t too much of a problem, but mountain lions and coyotes can be. A lot of calves are lost in early spring to coyotes,” says LaRue.

**A Bit of Background**

Deane LaRue grew up on a ranch near Salida. “I’m third generation on our ranch. My grandpa moved here in 1952 and had dairy cows. My dad bought him out and did the dairy for awhile. Then in the 1980’s the price of milk dropped through the floor and the price of alfalfa hay shot through the roof—when all the racehorse guys started feeding dairy quality hay to their horses. My dad walked in one day and laid a check on the table; he just sold the cows. We ended up leasing our place out for a couple years. Then my dad could tell I had a love for ranching and cows, and we started ranching,” she says.
“We bought all our neighbor’s heifers one year and got into the beef business. They were crossbred heifers, but I’d bought a few registered Angus cows a few years earlier. Cows have always been my passion. I started raising a few bulls, and at first we just used them on our own cows. Through the years I increased my registered herd.”

When she and her husband got married they bought out her dad. “We are running the home ranch and purchased the one right below us, to increase our operation. We run about 200 cows. This keeps me busy, between the ranch and the sale barn. Since we are at high altitude it takes all summer to get our hay put up. We sometimes have hay ready by the end of June if it’s been fertilized and we really push it, but there have been many years that we were putting up hay in October. You sweep the snow off the bales and salt them a little bit before you stack them!” she says.

“I do think the feed grown at higher altitudes has more oomph. It grows more slowly and has a higher protein level—more nutrients. There are a few advantages to high altitude ranching!”