

James A. Danekas
An Industry Icon
Compiled by Heather Smith-Thomas

Jim Danekas was a strong, passionate force in the beef industry—managing thousands of sales and publishing several outstanding magazines. His untimely passing leaves a huge void. He will be greatly missed by many friends and associates, and especially his family.

Background

James Albert Danekas was born August 4, 1947 in Watertown South Dakota. His parents, Walter and Valois Danekas, had a farm near the small town of Raymond and Jim was the oldest of 5 children. He helped his father on the farm, with crops of wheat and soybeans, and their herd of Angus cattle. Jim was very active in 4-H, raising and showing market steers for the county fair and breeding Angus heifers. His appreciation for Angus cattle started early. He also enjoyed playing on the Raymond High School basketball team, which sparked a life-long love of sports.

He graduated from high school in 1965 with honors, as Salutatorian, and attended South Dakota State University in Brookings to study Animal Science. He was a member of the Farmhouse Fraternity and helped manage the Little International Livestock Show at SDSU. During his college summers he was on the cattle show road assisting various farms all over the Midwest with their Hereford or Angus cattle.

Jim graduated from SDSU in 1969 and then enlisted in the Army. He was stationed in Alaska for a couple of years until his discharge in 1972. That year, he accepted a job as Manager of the Western States Angus Association, which took him to California. With this position, he travelled all over the western states meeting Angus breeders and attending many Angus shows and auctions. While attending the Cow Palace Grand National in San Francisco, he met a young lady, Sherry Houseworth, from southern California, who was also involved in the western cattle industry and loved Angus cattle.

Jim and Sherry were friends for many years and then married (July 29, 1978) and started their life together in the Sacramento area. They were a good team, and began a venture of their own, called James Danekas and Associates (JDA). They published a monthly regional magazine called *Angus, the Magazine*, and Jim managed Angus sales all over the West and Midwest.

He and Sherry also started a family. Daughter Danielle was born in December 1979, and daughter Mercedes was born in December 1981. Jim loved watching his girls grow up, playing softball together. They inherited his strong work ethic; Danielle is now a chef in a downtown restaurant and Mercedes joined her parents in the publishing business and sales management as she shares her father's passion for cattle.

Jim continued publishing the Angus magazine and also took on the responsibility of publishing the *California Cattleman Magazine*. Later he and Sherry began a new publication called *Western Cowman*, with readership throughout the West—commercial and purebred cattlemen of all breeds. Sherry edited this new magazine, and eventually their daughter Mercedes edited the Angus magazine, and later changed its name to *Angus Icon*.

JDA sales management grew to include bull sales, female sales, show heifer prospect sales, and other breeds besides Angus. As a family, the Danekas threesome had their own herd of Angus; their breeding program is known as Pheasant Trek, producing numerous champions in national Angus shows. JDA managed the first Wagyu production sale in the U.S. and last year Jim and his team started another publication, called *Wagyu World*. During the past 5 years, daughter Mercedes joined the JDA team and began learning the sales management business as well as the magazine business.

Jim had many plans for the future, and did an incredible job with many successful enterprises—in spite of a bad heart. The last few months of his life became increasingly difficult, and he passed away February 9, 2015 after a long battle to survive. At his side as he left this world were his wife, daughters, son-in-law Matt Lohse, sister Ruth and her husband Gary, and office manager Leah. Jim is a legend in the cattle industry, and will be remembered as one of the best sales managers and cattlemen known.

Comments from Friends

Jim was highly respected by business associates and several of them became close friends—even if they started out as fierce competitors in the marketing world.

C.D. “Butch” Booker (also in the auction business, handling cattle sales across the West) worked with Jim a lot over the past 25 years. “Previous to that I was a competitor, traveling with a couple different livestock publications. That’s how I got acquainted with Jim. I was working for the Western Livestock Reporter, with Pat Goggins, and Jim was managing quite a few sales, so I had to call him to get ads from him, and that wasn’t always an easy task. As a young guy trying to learn how to do it, I had to get past his hard façade, and then I finally got to know him,” says Booker.

“Jim took a lot of pride in his family. He was gone from home a lot, but when I traveled with him he always talked about his girls—which included his wife Sherry. He was proud of ‘his girls’, and proud of his sisters and his mother, and I was fortunate enough to meet his mom. Like any other family in America, they were trying to carve out a living. They had a niche that was unique, and worked hard at it.”

“I spent a lot of time with Jim on the road, with many great memories. He had a passion for purebred cattle, especially Angus. He was raised on an Angus farm and that background came through, even though many people didn’t realize this. It was many years before I knew that he grew up with Angus. But after you knew that, you could always see that passion. He transferred that same passion to the breeders he worked with,” says Booker.

“He had an understanding of the industry that allowed him to be an expert at managing sales, and the publication business. Even though he liked to have a hand in everything, he was smart enough to know he couldn’t do it all, and surrounded himself with what he felt were the best people to help him. On the photography end of it he used David Stoecklein—who is also fresh on our minds with his recent passing—and some of the best people for editorial,” says Booker.

“When he was younger, I think he thought he could do it all, and he really tried. I’ve encountered very few people in my travels in the industry who worked as hard as Jim, and no one that worked any harder to accomplish what was in front of him.”

“It wasn’t until recent years that he embraced some of the modern methods like bidder numbers. I convinced him to use those at auctions because I told him he was

losing the contact information of some people that would maybe be there. It clicked with him, and by the next sale he was using bidder numbers. He could also see how important social media would be, but he wasn't the first to jump on a fad. He had to be sure it would work," says Booker.

"When you looked deep into Jim, he was really two different people. You had to get to know him to see the deeper side. When he was doing business, or at a sale, that was the Jim of the day. He was all business. As soon as the sale was over and everything was done, and you were in the car headed down the road together, then you could get to know a different side of Jim. Unfortunately, a lot of people in our industry never got the chance to know the other side of him."

Later in life Jim found out he had sleep apnea. "When he started sleeping with that sleep machine, getting adequate rest, he was a totally different person. All of a sudden he was more rested and had more energy. He was a very different person to be around, and that's when I really started liking him. We really clicked and realized we were a benefit to one another and could help each other. We both looked at sales as helping the breeder—whether it was a consignment sale with 20 or 30 breeders or a production sale and you are working for one person that day," Booker says.

"If someone hired him, those cattle were his focus. He could find the positives in them and tell you they were the best cattle that were for sale anyplace. When he was on a team he went to work to add value to that program." Jim realized that a sale is that breeder's income for the year, and that sale day could make or break that person. He was dedicated to doing everything he could for the people whose sales he managed. He never did it half-way or 90%. It was always 110%.

"He had some mannerisms when he was on the block and some people wondered why he was so noisy, but he was one-of-a-kind as far as the excitement and enthusiasm that he tried to bring to the event. He would holler and say things like 'Don't let him get away from you! He's a good one!' and when somebody would bid he would scream, 'Oh yeah, yeah, yeah!' Some of the commercial buyers thought it was a distraction to what they were trying to do, but it was Jim's way of bringing more enthusiasm to the event," Booker says.

"He was the most knowledgeable person you'd ever meet, regarding pedigrees of cattle. He brought a very professional side to the business that went back to the roots he came from. He presented the total package—knowing the cattle, knowing where we were in the marketplace--and he really cared. Some people didn't see that side of him, unfortunately, but never meant any ill will to anyone. He was always very fair."

"He would call me and say he had a full page reserved for me and I would always tease him and say 'Just one?' In the last few years I never did tell him what to put in the ad. I'd just tell him to run whatever he thought was fair. I trusted his judgment and just let him handle it and take care of it."

"One of the things I'll miss about Jim Danekas is getting to a sale and knowing that Jim has already been there for 2 days and everything is in order. You never had to worry or wonder if the sale order would be right. Every little detail was taken care of and Jim knew the entire offering. If you were around the sale site for an hour and went back in after looking at the bulls and said that you liked such and such lot and that you thought he was one of the best bulls out there, Jim would never have to look in his catalog to see which bull you were talking about. He'd say, 'Lot 43? You mean the son of such-and-

such?’ He knew those cattle and could remember them like no one else. He spent time studying them and always knew which ones they were, and he could find the good ones.”

The last few years, as the industry made changes, he still liked big cattle. “He always maintained that we’re selling pounds and he preferred bigger cattle; his opinions were formed during the 1970’s when large cattle were more in favor. He always had an appreciation for the ones that were thick but he leaned toward the ones that had a little more size,” says Booker.

“I will really miss Jim. We had a lot of dinners together. Behind that hard core façade he was a pretty damn good boy. It’s just so hard for me to believe that he is gone. I’d see him a lot in the spring and the fall at all the sales, and then might not see him for 2 or 3 months in the summer. I just keep thinking I’ll walk in and he’ll be there, and it’s hard to realize that’s not the case anymore.”

“I don’t know how many sales I worked with Jim but it was several hundred. He took that job seriously, and he also took the publication business seriously. He had many awards from the Livestock Publishing Council over the years for his publications. That wasn’t all Jim; a lot of it was the hard work of his staff, but Jim always had a hand in everything. Some of the most creative ads ever written were written by Jim and his staff. They were all to be admired for their ability.”

In recent years Jim was involved in Wagyu sales. “We sold Wagyu cattle together in 4 or 5 states, as far away as New York for a dispersion. Jim was excited about that, and thought the Wagyu had merit as a breed for the future. The last time I talked to him, he was going to get a heart pump and he planned to keep going. He had a list of things he wanted to get done, and wasn’t stopping. He was not ready to quit, but his heart was,” says Booker.

Gary Kendall, who worked closely with Jim for many years, says he first met Jim in Spokane when Jim was fresh out of the Army. “He came to Spokane for his first job as a representative for the Western States Angus Association. He met with our group because he was going to conduct a sale for us for several years. Then my friend Dale Thompson and I showed him around the cattle operations in our area. He wore an Army fatigue jacket and we didn’t know much about him and he didn’t know much about us, but we got along fine,” recalls Kendall.

“Later, as a sale manager, he was a driven person. Some may not like the way he drove, but no one can say that he didn’t get down the road pretty straight. He was always honest with me. He and Eddie Mesple helped me merchandise and sell Kendall’s First Lady, the calf who later became National Champion female. Later on we took her dam to California and he got that cow sold for \$35,000 which at that day and age—in the 1980’s—was a lot of money.”

Jim knew how to merchandise, and paid attention to details. “He dotted the I’s and crossed the T’s. As a sales manager, he knew exactly the right recipe on how to manage and organize a sale. All his paperwork and summaries were in order. He also had a good eye for cattle. He wasn’t just a merchandiser. He loved cattle and knew how to assess and evaluate them. He knew what they looked like and what they should look like, and if something wasn’t quite right, he could spot that,” says Kendall.

“He was forever on the telephone, calling people. I copied a lot from him, in what I did in sales management—the things I’d seen him do—because he was so successful. There are sales managers who don’t do some of the things he did, and they

get by while things are good, but when the going gets rough a person has to go back to the basics, and Jim had the basics. Even with a bad sale, he could scour the country and get it done and make it work,” Kendall says.

“As an individual, he was a driven man, but he mellowed a bit in later life. In the early days all he wanted to do was work. It’s a wonder his family got to do anything fun because with Jim the work always seemed to come first—until his later years. Then I think his health made him realize there were other things in life.”

“In these later years, Jim would call me for something involving business and we’d end up just visiting. I told him he needed to enjoy things. I was a good 10 years older than him, and when he’d tell me about doing something I’d tell him to enjoy it because you won’t be able to do that forever. When those good times come along, take advantage and enjoy them! But to him, work was also an enjoyable thing. It was not just a job. He was very successful and he liked being successful,” says Kendall.

“He had a lot of self-respect and inner pride and wanted to look good and be successful, and he was. He knew the value of every animal. When he got off the block he knew exactly how they’d sold and what the average was, whereas I always wait until my secretary figures it out!”

“One time I went down to California and filled in for him at a sale, when his dad passed away. He had everything in order before he left and there wasn’t anything for me to do but the mechanics of it. He had everything taken care of,” Kendall recalls.

“People say he watched every penny, and he did. He was frugal and never threw money away. I didn’t take any pay for doing the sale for him. He paid for my flight and I told him I didn’t need payment, that I just did it for him as a friend. He wasn’t used to that. Sometimes if a group of us were at a meal it was a game to see who was going to pay for dinner. He called it a numbers game and was always trying to get out of paying for dinner! But he wasn’t stingy. When I got back from doing the sale for him, he sent me a gift certificate from Filson for a heavy wool jacket, worth more than \$300. He had that generous side, but no one was ever going to take advantage of him,” says Kendall.

“When he decided what the right path was, that was what he did, and that’s what he expected you to follow, too, if you were in consignment sales. He had to do a lot of consignment sales and those are not the easiest things to do—because you are working not with just one person selling cattle, but a group of people. You have to keep them all happy and that’s hard to do,” he says.

“I went to see him before he left for his dad’s funeral. We were eating at a local restaurant, and here comes Mercedes. She told him there was a rattlesnake at home. Neither he nor I liked snakes, so we went back to his house and got a spotlight, and there was that old rattlesnake. It was getting dark and he got a shovel. I told him that I’d hold the light and he could kill the snake! That was our private joke from then on—that I’d just let him take care of it.”

“I worked with him many times. He was always helpful but he’d also be critical. He’d sure tell you when something was wrong. He was a true perfectionist and it’s a sad day for the industry now that Jim is not going to be a part of it anymore. There are very few people that have the knowledge he had, and his love for the cattle and the industry, and the people,” says Kendall.

“He was always there for his friends. There are many people who can thank him for things, and remember all the good things he did. He was always on top of everything, and always got things done. I’ve tried to follow in his footsteps.”

Logan Ipsen, with Western Livestock Journal, has appreciated Jim for a long time. “I began my career with WLJ immediately out of college, and not knowing a thing about me, Jim instantly put faith in me and helped me develop marketing/sales skills in any way that I needed. I have always been grateful. He could have found reasons to use other publications, other ring men, or other people to help his business, but he used me—and would give me pointers, ideas, and new angles when selling ads, working sales, or dealing with clients. One time he told me, ‘The next generation has to learn, as well, and someone has to teach them.’ That stuck with me,” says Ipsen.

“I had the opportunity to travel many miles with Jim. The first 30 miles were always the same because this is when we talked about business: How many pages he’d sold that month. Who was buying what cattle. What we’re seeing in the business. Then for the rest of the trip I got to see a side of Jim that not many did. Most people know Jim as a true businessman to the core. But just past that, he was a guy just like the rest of us. He had his favorite sports teams that he followed religiously. He had his favorite places to eat, to drink, and so on.”

“I enjoyed our time traveling together, and teased him constantly—trying to ruffle his feathers—but he always stood his ground and threw it back at me. I judged Jim by the way he treated me, and that was always with respect; and I respected him. We had a good friendship. There are many things I learned from him and I am grateful. I’ll miss traveling with him,” Ipsen says.

“A couple years ago Jim and I were traveling home from a sale and I was driving. We were both really tired. As we came over a hill, a cop was waiting at the bottom. My radar detector never blinked, but the cop didn’t even need to turn on his lights. Our excess speed was obvious. As the officer approached the car, he went to the passenger side and was greeted by Jim’s story of why we were speeding. Seeing that the first story wasn’t working, Jim took the story in a different direction, with nearly the same result. After the officer ran my information, he came back to my car with his radar in his hand.”

“The officer said, ‘Son, it looks like you’ve got two bad co-pilots, so let’s fix at least one of them!’ So here we were, along the freeway in Fresno, California, with an officer standing 30 yards in front of my car testing to make sure my radar detector was working properly! Jim and I always joked and disagreed about the humor the officer had. Now fast forward one year, and Jim was driving his car to a sale and was traveling well over the speed limit when I got my turn to attempt to get Jim out of a ticket. Needless to say, Jim and I are even on that score,” says Ipsen.

“What I will miss most is Jim sharing his career with me. Every road we went down, there was an Angus breeder who either lived there currently or he know one who lived there earlier. And more likely than not, Jim had managed a sale for them at one point or another. He knew the history of programs, cattle, markets, and people, and could remember that information quickly and accurately. I learned as much about the history of western U.S. Angus breeders from Jim as anyone. He always had time for me and I appreciate his willingness to share with me what he had worked so hard to build. I also know there are many other people who share that same respect for Jim.”

Tom Burke is one of those. Tom grew up in Minnesota on an Angus farm, and has been an Angus sale manager longer than anyone else in history. “I was active in the Junior Angus Association and knew the Danekas family in South Dakota. I knew Jim’s father and uncles. I first met Jim at the Minnesota State Fair at Saint Paul in 1958 when he worked for the Jauger Brothers Shady Lane herd in Clear Lakes, South Dakota, fitting their cattle. Then he went off to the Army, and later became general manager of the Western States Angus Association in the early 1970’s,” recalls Burke.

“Since I also was in the sale management business, we were fierce competitors! We had great respect for each other, and were congenial, but at the same time we were competing for much the same business. I had a lot of respect for him and his knowledge, and the ‘Angus gene’ that he passed on to the next generation, in his daughter Mercedes. I met his wife Sherry when she worked for Ankony Shadow Isle in Loyalton, California, before they were married. I’ve known them for a long time and had a lot of respect and admiration for Jim and his family. They had a nice Angus herd and Jim had a passion for Angus cattle.”

“As we grew older, our relationship mellowed. In the early years we were adversaries, and both pretty aggressive. As we got older our admiration for each other grew and our friendship grew warmer and much more congenial, and that overshadowed the competition. Life became more precious to us and we became closer, and better friends,” says Burke.

“His family bred Angus, he was an Angus breeder, and he passed that enthusiasm to the next generation and I think that’s quite an accomplishment. I like to see it carrying on.” Burke currently works at the American Angus Hall of Fame in Smithville, Missouri. He has been an Angus sale manager for 50 years and has managed 8500 registered Angus sales.

“I’ve been an Angus breeder all my life. Like Jim, I was born into an Angus family. That’s the thing we had in common early on. Angus cattle were Jim’s passion, along with his wife and family. His life revolved around his family, and the Angus breed,” says Burke.

Carl Schohr is another good friend, even though Carl raises registered Herefords on a farm 60 miles north of Sacramento. “We are a rice and hay operation, and run a few registered Hereford cows, which created a bit of competition between us,” says Schohr.

“I’ve known Jim a long time and don’t remember where I met him. He seemed to be one of the people who were always there, in the cattle industry. He wasn’t really in the front, or the back. He was all about family and friends. He was a fan of agriculture as a whole, and a sports fan, and it was all wrapped up with a lot of dedication and determination,” Schohr says.

“He was very involved with family, not only his immediate family but also his extended family—people he chose or who chose him, to be involved with life outside the industry. He was unique in that way, whether he was your confidant or you were his confidant. And now, how do you talk about a good friend, when he’s gone? There are so many personal things—the laughs, the sorrows, all the things we shared.”

“Jim was always a big fan—of his friends, of sports, of agriculture as a whole. A lot of people don’t think of Jim as being the ordinary man he was. He’d call and ask me how to build a certain fence, for instance. You might not think of Jim as working on a fence, but he did. Or a tractor. He’d be out there driving his tractor in his field and

irrigating. Since I was farming, if he wanted to talk about something that involved farming or irrigating, or something with a tractor, or fertilizing, he'd call me, and I'd give him some kind of advice. He tried to take care of his place and did it from afar sometimes because his travels took him away from home," says Schohr.

"And if he'd called and you finally got around to calling him back, you never knew what time zone he would be in. You might be calling him in New York and it's midnight here! You'd ask what he's doing and he'd say he's getting ready to do a sale in New York—and oops, it's 3 in the morning. That's probably why he and I had a unique friendship; it went way past cattle and the livestock industry. He was a fan of ranching, and what ranchers do."

"He was always hunting for knowledge, and he tried to make his decisions based on some kind of information. He'd bounce things off me or you, if you were one of the people fortunate enough to be part of that. But a lot of people probably weren't fortunate enough to really get to know him. Those of us who did, feel like we've lost part of our family," says Schohr.

"Jim would always speak his mind, and he wasn't a saint and didn't want to be a saint. But if you asked him for an honest opinion you'd better be ready to receive one, and not be offended when he gave you an honest answer. He might be creating a challenge for you, or you created one for him, and he could accept it both ways. That's probably why he and I got along so well, because we could have the right to disagree and go on, and still respect each other," Schohr says.

They had friendly rivalry about cattle breeds, sports, and right down to the kind of cocktail they drank. "The first time we were going to have a drink together he said, 'Please don't laugh at me.' I said, 'Hey, I don't drink liquor because I'm trying to impress anyone; I drink it because I like the taste of it, so it won't matter what you're drinking.' He liked pina coladas, and I liked my liquor straight. So we had our differences! To make a pina colada you need an ice chest, milk, pineapple juice and I'd ask him, 'Good God! Are you making a fruit salad or are you making a drink?' Some guys are man enough to wear pink, and some guys are man enough to order a pina colada!" says Schohr.

"But we had a lot in common along with our differences. He'd come to our houseboat and we could talk about things completely apart from cattle. We're going to miss him on the houseboat. There was a different side of Jim that a lot of people probably never knew, and it was even different than what I thought it was, the first time he and Sherry accepted our invitation to come with us," says Schohr.

"He loved the Giants and I was a Dodger fan! But we could talk about anything—whether it was topics of international trade, border issues, over-government regulations, or under-government regulations—and it all fit with him as a fan of what the industry needs." Jim had great passion for the cattle industry.

"The main thing I'd say about him was that he had dedication and determination, and honesty. Whether Jim was on your side or against you, you knew you had an ally or an opponent, and you could respect him for that. He could always make you better. Jim was a guy that if you are not getting it right in his eyes, and you asked him, he'd tell you," says Schohr.

"He was often dealing with a health issue that he hid very well from a lot of people for a lot of years. He kept going, in spite of it all, but now he's gone—and it's

tough on his family and friends. I told Mercedes, ‘I am so sorry to hear he’s gone, but your dad is out of pain. Just walk outside and give yourself a hug. It’s a sunny day, and look up and wonder, is he sending us good information or trying to make us a challenge?’

He touched a lot of people. “When you lose a friend like Jim, you lose a lot, and you may not know for a long time how much you did lose. It comes back a little at a time—and he’s not really gone because you will never forget him.”

“There are personal things that you’ll miss. He promised me a Wagyu steak. He and Sherry bought a steer and he told me how great this was going to be, and invited me down for a steak dinner! But Jim ran out of time, or the steer took too long to be ready for harvest! I’m going to blame that slow-growing Wagyu, or that Jim was trying to get it too perfect—and now I’ll never get that steak! And I’ll never be able to kid him about it and say ‘How good was this supposed to be?’

“It’s impossible to put into words the years I knew Jim—the years of growing with him, and building a relationship. It’s easy to talk about him, in a way, because there were so many things we did together and so many things that remind me of those—from who had the best picture, to who had the best bull, to what the best brand of tractor was. But to sum it all up I have to say it boils down to his being a fan of many things (there are many blades on that fan!), and his dedication and determination.” He had a lot of interests and pursued them passionately.

Jerry York, now retired from Western Livestock Journal, met Jim in 1972. “We both started traveling that year—he was with the Western States Angus Association, and I was with Northwest Farm magazines. I traveled a lot of miles with Jim and worked a lot of sales with him and for him; we became friends as well as competitors. It was a unique situation because he was a competitor, a friend, and also a customer of mine when he managed sales and did business with Western Livestock Journal,” says York.

“Jim was a good guy and a hard worker. There wasn’t anybody I’ve ever been around, in all my 42 years of traveling, who worked any harder for the Angus breed than Jim did. Over the years I’ve worked with a lot of sale managers, in many different breeds, and I can’t think of any who were more thorough in attending to all the details, getting bids lined up and making sure everything was taken care of. Jim was amazing at this. He always carried a lot of orders with him and was very well organized. He was a super good sales manager,” York says.

“He was a tenacious ad-seller. He diligently went out and sold his publication but didn’t bad-mouth anybody else to get his deal done. I always appreciated that about him. He was single-minded. He didn’t play golf or anything like that; his job was his work and his hobby. He loved what he was doing, and he loved his place in California.”

“I stayed at his house many times and had dinner with his family. Jim was meticulous about his place. Sunday morning he’d be out there mowing the grass and pruning trees. He’d go out in the pasture and pull thistles by hand so he could get them all. He took a lot of pride in that place,” says York.

“Another thing he was very proud of was when he and his daughter Mercedes had the reserve Champion Angus bull in Denver. I think the bull’s name was PT Famous Addiction. The bull was in Mercedes name, but it was Jim’s breeding program and he was very proud of that accomplishment.”

“He was devoted to the breed, though in later years he started doing Wagyu sales. Jim liked to make money, and he saw some opportunities with the Wagyu. No one else

was doing it, so he jumped in on it. He was innovative, and always prepared—not only for his sales, but for other things,” says York.

“About 20 years ago he was publishing the *California Cattleman Magazine*. The board of directors decided to let the bid out to other people. Jim ended up losing that magazine, but he didn’t miss a beat. The next month, he came out with *Western Cowman* magazine. He was well prepared, not only on the sales, but with business opportunities. He had his guns loaded all the time! He hit the ground running.”

“When he was working, he was all business. Even though he didn’t show it a lot, he had a really great sense of humor. He didn’t tell a lot of jokes, but always appreciated a good joke or a trick we’d play on one of the guys when we traveled. A good sense of humor gets a person quite a ways in life,” says York.

“The other thing I found was that Jim never drank in the early years. Later, after his first heart surgery, he lightened up a little and he’d have a beer with you after a sale. Then he and Sherry went on a cruise and someone got him to try a pina colada, and he decided he liked pina coladas! He also liked good food. Sherry is a really good cook, and when we were traveling he was always telling me what she’d cooked him for dinner the night before. He loved a good meal and his pina colada!

“When I traveled to California in September, there were bull sales nearly every day; we might have 26 or 27 sales that month. Gas prices were so high for so many years that Jim and I would take turns driving. One day we’d take his car and the next day we’d take mine, to save gas. He’d drive 10 miles out of his way to find the cheapest gas. Then when he’d get filled up he’d be going down the road, checking his mileage—messing with that little on-board computer that kept you updated on what kind of gas mileage the car was getting. He measured those things meticulously, and a lot of people kidded him about being tight. He wasn’t cheap on things he wanted to do, but he was frugal and knew how to make that dollar work,” says York.

“Jim, myself, and Logan Ipsen would travel together up to Calistoga at the north end of the Napa Valley to the Oak Ridge Angus sale. It was always on a Sunday and on our way home we’d come through the Napa Valley and always stopped at a certain winery that Jim really liked. He’d hunt up the same guy and we’d taste all the wines.”

“The main thing I remember and appreciate about Jim was his hard work. I admired his work ethic. We are sure going to miss him. When you’ve known someone for 42 years, it’s hard to realize that he’s gone. He was only 67 and that’s too soon to be gone. I don’t think Jim ever thought about retiring. I retired this year, after traveling for 42 years, but I don’t think the thought of retirement ever crossed Jim’s mind,” says York.

Clyde and Ruby Nelson are long-time Angus breeders near Salmon, Idaho who have known Jim Danekas for many years, as their sales manager and as a friend. “He took part in our 7th annual sale in 1972 and was there for us for 59 sales. He was very energetic, he never left a stone unturned and always had everything done in good order. He was very easy to get along with and we enjoyed him in a friendly relationship. It was more than just business,” Clyde says.

“We were surprised to hear of his passing, and could hardly believe that he’s gone. He’s the kind of person who wouldn’t want everybody to know he was in ill health, but we will really miss him. He was a great guy to work with. He was always ambitious and wanted to get the job done and do it right. This was one reason he was so successful.”

“We didn’t have a clue that he had heart problems, but I remember that he wasn’t feeling very well one day when he was here for our sale, sorting cattle before the sale. He thought it was indigestion, and Ruby said, ‘Here, take some tums and they will fix you up.’ I think he had his first heart surgery soon after that, and this was our joke with him from then on! He told us those tums really ruined his heart!” recalls Clyde.

Family Tributes

Matt Lohse, Jim’s son-in-law, met Jim about a month after he began dating Jim’s daughter Mercedes. “I remember being so nervous! I didn’t really know what to expect. But he was very open with me, and a great guy. We hit it off right away. It was amazing how quickly he welcomed me into the family when I became engaged to his baby girl. He seemed happy and excited,” says Matt.

“I felt really blessed, and it was wonderful to have him in my life. I felt lucky to have these past 3 years with him, especially this past year after Mercedes and I were married because we lived only a few miles apart. We got to see Jim and Sherry fairly often and we grew very close.”

“Jim and I both loved sports, especially baseball, and the Giants. I used this as a way to hang out with my father-in-law—especially when we went to a Giants game. I loved to sit in wonderful seats, and it was a good excuse to buy a better ticket because I was taking my father-in-law. Knowing he was sick, and fighting this battle, I wanted to help, but didn’t know how. We always hoped we’d have lots of time together but we never really knew. It was like, ‘Well, we should just go ahead and do it’ so we often went to a Giants game,” Matt says.

“Last year we took a trip to San Diego to watch the Giants play there. Mercedes and Sherry and Jim and I all went to a game and then the girls wanted to go shopping. So Jim and I decided to go to another game while they went shopping, and got to watch two games in two days. We probably watched the worst baseball game we’d ever watched, but it was still good because I got to watch it with my father-in-law. And then we were blessed when the Giants made it to the World Series. Mercedes and I decided to take Jim to that game and it was awesome to share that day with him.”

“I was fortunate also to be able to travel with him a couple times to the National Western, and to a few of the sales they’ve done, and share those times with him. I was not from a cattle family, or from a sales-management family, so it was an honor to see it first hand and learn a little bit about the business. From an outsider’s perspective, coming into it, it was truly amazing to watch him work. I loved hearing him on the phone, or watching him working the ring or working on the block. I am glad I got to see that, and to see how proud he was when Mercedes did it for him. He wasn’t able to go to Denver to the last sale, so Mercedes and I went. He was so proud to watch the sale on the computer and know that it was incredibly well done under her management.”

“I really appreciated the great integrity that Jim always had. No matter who he was talking to, he was always straight with them, sometimes even to a fault. He was always honest with everyone. To me, that was one of the greatest things in his legacy--how he treated people,” Matt says.

“We came back from that sale in Denver and got off the airplane in Sacramento and drove to the hospital. At that point in time he had made some improvement and was doing ok in the hospital so we went to visit him. We walked into his room and he had his

sale book there on the counter. While we were visiting he pulled out that sale book and opened it. He had all the prices that he'd written in it while he and his brother watched the entire sale on-line. He was asking us who bought what and we were sitting there trying to remember all those details off the top of our heads after not having much sleep and jet lag from the plane. He was even asking questions about how the bidding went on certain lots. He was so excited that Mercedes had a great sale, and that it went well, and was so proud of his daughter."

"The amazing thing about Jim is that he built his company out of nothing, and built JDA into something that could be sustainable into the future. I think that's what he was so proud about; the next generation was proving that they were capable. I know it meant a lot to him. I walked out of that room thinking how excited he was, but didn't really think more about it until recently and then it struck me. I'm glad he got to see that," says Matt.

"Jim and Sherry's love for each other was such a strong bond. My parents have been married for about the same time they have. I appreciate being around families that care. Jim would get home from a sale and we'd be sitting there talking, or at dinner. One of the things that drew me to Mercedes—and to her family as I got to know them better—was that core of affection, just as in my own family." Family comes first.

"Jim was truly a great father and a great husband. That's what I wanted to have, in my own family. A person needs to marry someone with those same values. So it was wonderful to see that Mercedes came from that kind of family and represents a part of that," says Matt.

Mercedes was very close to her father. She says it was devastating to lose him. "My dad and I are very similar in so many ways, and we shared the same passion for cattle and the cattle business. We were very much alike in the way we are with people, and business. People even say I look like him—and early on I didn't think that was a good thing! But now I am honored to be told that," she says.

"He was the most honest person, even at times in business when it wasn't always the best, because some people couldn't handle his honesty. But I know he never had any regrets—even if he lost business because of it. He knew, deep down in his soul, that he never misled anyone." Even the people who didn't appreciate his honesty, in the end probably respect him for it.

His honesty was sometimes extreme, as when pointing out flaws in cattle, but he never meant to hurt anyone. He was just trying to help them by saying they needed to work on this or that. Some people can't take constructive criticism, but Jim was not going to avoid the truth just to please people by telling them what they wanted to hear. He told them exactly what he saw and thought.

"He's done so much for so many people, whether they understood it or not. He always wanted to do right by people, even the ones who didn't deserve it. He never was cruel to them. There are some great people in this industry but also some that didn't deserve my dad's time and yet he gave it to them. He was a bigger person, and I only hope to achieve that, too, at some point in my life," says Mercedes.

"He'd always be telling me, 'Don't let it bother you. You can't change it.' Don't stress over things you can't fix. He had such a strong backbone, yet such sensitivity." His heart and soul was in sale management and being on the block on sale day. He worked as hard as he could for people, no matter what the circumstances.

“He was a very respected man, and a very simple man—though he loved a nice car. He always had a Mercedes or a BMW--never bought new--always used, but he loved those cars. Other than that, however, he was the most simple and unpretentious man you’d ever meet,” she says.

“He came from a farming family, from a little town in South Dakota. Even today the streets are still gravel roads in downtown Raymond. That’s where he’ll be buried, beside his father. He came to California to get out of the cold, but he chose to be buried in the little town where he came from, in that little cemetery. There are so many Danekas family members there. His great-grandparents are buried there—a lot of history.”

“He grew up with a love of agriculture and Angus cattle. When he graduated from South Dakota State he went into the Army, and we are thankful that the Army sent him to Alaska instead of Vietnam!

“People are dealt different things in life. He wasn’t sent to Vietnam but he had a heart problem—a faulty valve—which he was born with. It wasn’t discovered until his late thirties,” says Mercedes. He had surgery in 1998 to try to correct it, which didn’t work, and another surgery 6 months later, but irreparable damage had already been done. He continued to work hard, in spite of a bad heart, relying on sheer determination and strong will power.

“He was not only my father, but my best friend and business partner. He was so gracious; he took me under his wing, especially the past several years. He let me grow with him and help him out. He needed my help, physically, but he also taught me everything and I discovered what made him great,” says Mercedes.

Going with her father to help him with sales were at times wonderful and at times frustrating. “He was always such a hard worker that he never stopped for lunch. It didn’t matter what the weather was; we’d be out there in the snow and cold sorting bulls or in 100-degree weather sorting cattle. We didn’t stop until the work was done! We were at a sale in Idaho and had 2 more pens of bulls to sort before the end of the day, and at that point in time I was cold, tired and hungry. He wouldn’t stop, and I said some words I regret. I threw my sorting stick down and I left his ass there at the yards! Everyone around us looked at us and wondered what was going on. But after that, we always stopped for lunch!

“He wanted to take care of me, but he was such a dedicated worker that he wouldn’t even take care of himself. It made me mad, because I knew his condition, and I knew he needed to stop for lunch and take a break and drink some water. But that was the last day that ever happened,” she says. From then on he stopped for lunch, realizing that it was best for both of them.

“I don’t really regret that episode; it actually made us stronger and better together as we worked side by side. But I have to laugh at my outburst. I was so mad. He didn’t even say he was sorry. I just picked him up later that day and we went to dinner and nothing was said about it and we just moved on. That was how he was. My family is like that. We lay things out on the table whether people like to hear it or not, and work it out and move on, with no hard feelings. He always looked forward, not back, and moved forward to whatever needed to be done next, working toward the positive at the end. That was what he did,” she says.

“He took such good care of me and my mom over the years. He gave us such an amazing life. I was able to show cattle all over the country with my family’s herd of

Angus and when we would do well, the best part was not the awards or titles, but seeing his excitement and pride,” says Mercedes.

“He was probably the last person to find out what heifers he bought at a sale, through friends, because he didn’t like spending money! But in the long run, he was the happiest person to stand in the background at one of the shows if we happened to win. The only times I saw him cry were when his father died, when we won cow shows and when I got married. This was such a momentous event for me, my wedding because for so many years I didn’t know if he would still be here to walk me down the aisle.” He gave an amazing speech to Mercedes, at her wedding, and there wasn’t a dry eye in the house.

“We feared, for so many years, that we wouldn’t have him much longer. There were so many times that we were very close to losing him, but he hung in there—which shows what a fighter he was. He never complained, even though he would be so cold because his body wasn’t working right and he was short of oxygen. He just gritted his teeth and stuck to it and kept going. When I was growing up he’d always tell me, in the tough situations, to just bite my lip and move forward, and that’s what he did each and every day. He’s the strongest person I know,” says Mercedes.

“He wasn’t big in stature, or physically strong, but he was the strongest person I ever knew. He and my mother are the biggest inspiration for my life. The three of us made an amazing team. We could get a lot done in our little office in a weeks’ time, and a year’s time. We were an efficient team, even in the last few months when he wasn’t doing well at all,” she says.

Mercedes was a big help to him the last couple of years, making it possible to keep going. She went to all the sales with him, dragging his luggage—with all the sales equipment—through the airports. He was forbidden by his doctors to lift anything or exert, and would not have been able to go to the sales if she hadn’t traveled with him.

“He sat on the block for more than 100 bulls in early December, and had an amazing bull sale in Idaho. I was supposed to take over for him partway through, but the sale was going so well and I could see the enjoyment he was having. He didn’t look back at me even once during that sale to say please take over for me, so I wasn’t going to take that experience away from him,” says Mercedes.

“He loved sales management and cattle sales, but more importantly he loved his team—the people he worked with all the time. Butch Booker was one of them. It was hard in January when I had to do a sale with Butch, when my dad was in the hospital, but it’s really going to be tough now, with him gone. Yet I feel that he’s always going to be right there beside us. I just want everyone to know that he is still here in spirit and inside of me. I was strong before, but I will be even stronger now, as I keep his legacy going. In good times and tough times we will keep going and just keep getting bigger and better.” He left a good path to follow and she will continue to fulfill his goals for him, knowing deep down that she is very much like her father.

“It was so tough, losing him, and if I didn’t have such a strong feeling that he is still here, spiritually, I don’t know how I could handle it,” she says.

The family didn’t say much about his heart condition for a long time, and only his close friends knew. “A lot of people knew there was something wrong, but they didn’t know the severity. He didn’t want sympathy. He had a hard time agreeing to let me run the recent article about him in our magazines.”

“I was always hoping that he would get better because he’s always wanted to visit Australia with my mom. When I was talking to him about the heart pump procedure we were planning, after he almost died earlier in January from a staph infection, I told him that a lot of people are doing well with it. He was scared to do it, but it was our last possible chance for him to survive. He told me there were a lot of things he still wanted to do, like go to Australia, and see the cattle country.”

He liked to travel, and wherever he went he enjoyed talking to people. He and Sherry sometimes took the girls on cruises, and before the end of the week Jim knew everybody on board, including the employees. He always took a sincere interest in people and he’d ask about their jobs and their lives.

Jim had a strong passion for cattle and the people in the cattle industry. “He was a part of this for so long, and I am proud that I still have the Danekas name. It will be carried on, if I ever have any children. My husband says that if we have a son he wants to name him James. My dad always liked kids, even though he never admitted it, and I know he would be proud to have a grandson named after him.”

He also loved his little ranch. “His favorite thing to do was go out to irrigate our pastures. He’d be out there for hours. My mom would get frustrated with him because it would be dinner time and he’d still be out there. She’d call out there and ask what he was doing and he’d say he was watching the water! He couldn’t just turn it on and walk away; he was a perfectionist and wanted to make sure every little edge could get water and be green. It would drive him crazy if it didn’t!”

“He was always a tidy person, just like his father (my grandfather). They had the tidiest farm, and my dad was the same way. But his work desk was a mess! I always gave him crap about it and told him, ‘For as neat as you are, how do you live like this?’ I would go in and clean his desk and then he’d be so mad because he said he couldn’t find anything and I’d ask him how on earth he found it before?”

He was a big sports fan. “His passion was the San Francisco Giants. He watched every game and knew all about the team and the players. When the Giants made it to the World Series my husband and I decided that he needed to get to a game. I called my mom and she said yes, we’ve got to get tickets. My mom told us to just go ahead and get the tickets and she’d pay for them, but to not tell my dad! She wanted us to tell him that we bought those tickets! To this day we laugh about this because my dad still thought we bought them for him. My husband went to the game with Dad and my Dad had the time of his life. I am glad that Matt got to take him. If Dad had known who bought the tickets he wouldn’t have enjoyed it as much. He had the money for it, but he was pretty stingy about buying things for himself,” she says.

“But he had a good final year, even though he was struggling to survive. We managed a sale together in May that grossed over a million dollars, and that was exciting and something I will never forget. I was so proud to see him so happy. He got to go to the World Series game, and he got to walk me down the aisle at my wedding. This was the first time he’d ever worn a tuxedo and was nervous, but he looked so good! I’ll never forget the joy of having him be there, even though about halfway through the father/daughter dance he was really tired and asked how much longer—because he was having a hard time breathing. He was so worried about getting through it, but he did, just like he did everything.” He had tremendous determination.

It was hard on all of them when he was in the hospital at the last 45 days. “I missed him so much before, and now it’s a pain I can’t even describe. He and I were so close, and we spent a lot of hours together on the road. I am so glad I had those days with him. We’ve always had a fear, for so many years, that he wouldn’t be ok. Thank God he was a fighter and so meticulous about his pills and taking care of himself. His doctors said he was the best patient they’d ever met, and I thank him for taking all those pills that kept him alive for so long. I thank him for not eating many sweets—even though he loved them—to make sure that his body stayed healthy,” says Mercedes.

“When they told him he couldn’t have any more pina coladas (his favorite drink) he chose to forgo that enjoyment, just to be able to stay around longer. He gave up many things, to be able to be here a few more years, and I thank him immensely for that. But his body gave out and he just couldn’t keep going any longer. He hung on longer than anyone (and the doctors) ever thought he would. It’s my selfishness that I want him back, but I know how tired and miserable he was at times, even though he never complained about it,” she says.

“He was the best dad. And he is still letting my mom and I know what to do, and where everything is. We’ll be trying to find something and suddenly we realize where it is. I know he is with us, and will be with us. I just wish I could give him a hug again!”

“When I saw him that Thursday night, before his surgery for the heart pump, I was coming home from work after taking photos in Oregon and stopped by the hospital. A certain sadness came over me when I went into his room, and I didn’t know why. I just couldn’t stop crying and he asked me why I was crying. I said I didn’t know, but that I missed him so much. When I said good-bye to him that night I gave him a hug and if I had known what I know now, I would not have let go! That was the last hug I could give him, but thank God I was able to give it.”

“He left us with some of the funniest stories, and he did some of the funniest things, and that’s part of what made him who he was. In his last hours all of us at the hospital cried, we laughed, we told lots of stories with his sisters, his brothers-in-law and my mom and I’ll never forget any of those times. It’s still so unreal that he’s gone. One of the hardest things was when I had to call his friends and tell them.

“He died at such a young age, but he went a lot farther than the specialists thought he would. I am grateful for his fight, and I just hope he is not cold anymore, and I hope he is drinking pina coladas and eating all the sweets he wants, and looking at green cow pastures with all the beautiful cows that were part of our herd throughout the years. I hope he is sitting on the fence with his father, talking about those cows!”

“I feel the worst for my mom, because dad was the love of her life and there was so much more they wanted to do together. A lot of my pain right now is for my mom. Even after he passed away we came into the office and we worked, because that’s what he would have wanted, putting together one of the magazines. I will be determined, the rest of my life, to continue his business and make it even bigger and better, for him.”

“The major hurdle in life was his heart, and that hurdle finally got to be too high. Even if he’d gotten a heart transplant I don’t know if he would have made it. Mind over matter can only go so far, but he took it to the ultimate lengths, with an incredibly strong will. I have a heritage to be grateful for. I am so proud to call him my father.”