

WISE COUNTY MESSENGER

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James Wood Way



1937-2020

Local icon built dealerships, community

BY KRISTEN TRIBE
ktribe@wcmessenger.com

Known for his business savvy and acts of kindness, car dealer James Wood was a champion of Wise County. He used a common sense approach and put people first as he steered his company to national notoriety and fine-tuned the "James Wood Way."

But the pioneer of the local automotive business was not known for his prowess behind the wheel.

"To be such a great car man, he was a bad driver," said Carey Wil-

liams, executive manager of James Wood Motors, with a laugh. "Everybody in his organization knew it. He'd scare you to death in a car."

Longtime Sales Manager Richard Flynt, who retired after 38 years with the dealership, recalled a trip to Lake Tahoe, Calif., with Wood and a handful of other employees for a new car show.

"He decided we were going to take a van and tour through the state, see the Wine Country," he said. "But every time we stopped we'd race
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SHOWING HIS HEART — James Wood hands out a ribbon during the Heart of a Champion show during the Wise County Youth Fair.

BY ROY EATON
reaton@wcmessenger.com

Decatur business and civic leader James F. Wood, 82, died in a Denton hospital Wednesday, April 22, 2020.

He was the owner of General Motors dealerships in Decatur and Denton, James Wood Hyundai in Decatur and Neighborhood Autos used car dealerships in several cities.

Wood was injured in a fall at his home Sunday.

James was born Nov. 4, 1937, to Frank and Lela (Welch) Wood in Bridgeport. He married Shirley

Dale Stanley Nov. 7, 1959. He was a graduate of Decatur High School and a member of Victory Family Church.

"Wise County has lost a community icon with the passing of James Wood," said County Judge J.D. Clark. "A titan of our local business community and a philanthropist with a loving, giving heart, James made an incredible mark on this county. His generous spirit and belief in leaving a place better than you found it has benefited us all. We should all be thankful for
See Wood on page 6



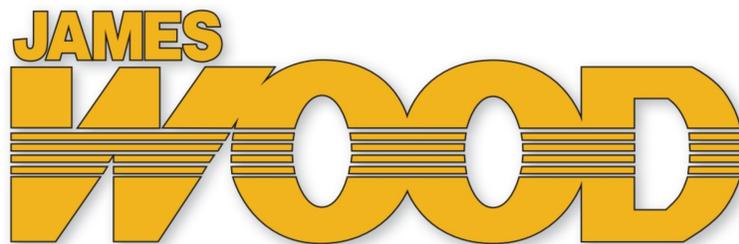
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Wise County Messenger
P.O. Box 149 • 115 South Trinity
Decatur, Texas 76234
www.wcmessenger.com



To honor James' spirit of giving, in lieu of flowers, memorial donations can be made to the Wise Health Foundation by check or online. For more info:
WiseHealthFoundation.com/Donate



Icon: Celebrating a life well-lived

Continued from page 1

back to the van when it was time to leave to make sure one of us got under the steering wheel, so he didn't.

"He'd turn around and talk to you in the back seat while changing lanes," he said with a laugh. "He was not known for being the best driver."

Life with Wood was a wild ride, and as his sales skyrocketed, so did his generosity. He owned General Motors dealerships in Decatur and Denton, James Wood Hyundai in Decatur and Neighborhood Autos used car dealerships in several cities, and he set the example for taking care of people and bolstering a community.

People first

Parts Manager Roger Hitt, who celebrated his 40th anniversary with the dealership in February, said Wood was a great person.

"I'd heard good things about him [before coming to work for him], and they're all true," he said. "In my early days with him, I thought this guy is never going to make it in the car business. He just gives so much.

"But I found out that's just the way he did business. He's an awesome guy."

Described as generous to a fault sometimes, Williams said Wood always did the right thing. He recalled a Saturday many years ago when Wood was active on the showroom floor and the two of them jumped in a customer's pickup to get an appraisal on it.

Wood was behind the wheel, the two of them were discussing the deal and Wood backed into another customer's car.

"The bumper of that pickup was in the headlight of the car behind us," Williams said.

"That guy gets out and is so mad he crushed a styrofoam coffee cup he'd been holding. He was upset ... asking James if he ever looks where he's going when he's backing up."

Wood told him he normally did, but his mind must have been elsewhere in that moment.

"Do you even work here?" the man hissed.

Williams said Wood, in his easy going way, replied: "Well, I'm embarrassed to tell you this, but I own the place." He sent me on to the appraisal and took the guy inside. He just made it right. He's that kind of guy."

Williams paused for a

minute.

"I still don't know how much we lost on that trade," he said with a laugh.

Williams said Wood inspired his staff.

"He never had to ask you to ride for the brand," he said. "You wanted to ride for the brand because of his reputation."

Flynt said Wood was easy to work for because he was always truthful.

"You always knew you'd be dealt with honestly," he said. "He was straight and square on every deal, and I knew I'd be off on Sunday. That was important to me.

"That's why I stayed so long ... he took care of those of us working for him. He was always ready to help you if you needed it."

Williams said Wood's care and concern was extended to the entire staff.

"No matter if you were a porter or general manager, he was never too busy to take the time to sit down and listen to you," he said. "He wouldn't comment while you talked; he would just listen. He might be doodling on his little pad, and when you finished, he would give you his thoughts.

"What you had to say mattered to him."

Williams said on more than one occasion when he felt stressed trying to solve a problem and shared it with Wood, he would tell him, "Son, this will look better tomorrow."

"I asked him one time, 'Do you not worry?'" Williams said.

"No, I don't," Wood said. "Because what you're worried about today will be there tomorrow, plus a little more."

Wise County Messenger President Roy Eaton and long-time friend to Wood appreciated that positivity and Wood's ability to keep things in perspective while lightening the mood with humor.

"Things could be challenging at the newspaper, and I would drop by for a visit with James and always come away with a new attitude," he said. "When the paper would do a tough story on some politician and I would walk into the dealership, he would kid me by saying he didn't want to be too close in case that politician came after me."

Williams remembers a few times when Wood didn't mince words, recalling his straightforward insight.

Williams said he was dealing with an issue in his personal life many years ago, and after sharing it with Wood, his mentor put his arm around him and said a prayer.

"Then he patted me and said, 'Well, I think you're trying to make an apple pie out of a pile of crap.' He was a very unique man," Williams said with a chuckle.

Heart of gold

Wood established himself as one of the most successful car dealers in the country over the years, but in Wise County, it wasn't just about the sea of vehicles.

As County Judge J.D. Clark noted, although it had grown into an empire of sorts, James Wood Motors always felt like a community business.

"He's been such a fantastic example of a business man, a self-made man, who then did so much good with it in the community that he didn't have to do," he said. "And it wasn't just writing a check. He was actively involved in the community and physically at things, especially if it was for kids."

Wood made extraordinary efforts to contribute to local youth programs, the largest of which was the Wise County Youth Fair. For years, Wood has been instrumental in the success of the Youth Fair auction, buying projects himself, cajoling other business owners to do the same and eventually founding the Champions and Blue Ribbon Club, along with Eaton. The group has raised \$1.4 million since 2006 said current club president Beau Bell.

"It was their vision and what they put together is unmatched," he said. "I talk with a lot of other counties and their grand champion steers never bring in what ours does."

Eaton said he'd "lost track of how many cakes, pies or plants I have bought, some willingly and some unwillingly, because of the strong arm of James F. Wood."

Since 2016, Wood has been the guest judge for Heart of a Champion, a special needs livestock show held on Friday of the Youth Fair.

Youth Fair Board President Tim Fletcher said watching Wood's expression as he handed out rosettes to participants will perhaps be one of his favorite memories of the community icon.

"It just showed someone of

his status didn't mind being involved with the kids, and I don't know that everybody feels that way," he said. "The board always felt that James, back in the day of the Sheriff's Posse and way back, was the backbone, and he was plumb through 'til the day he passed away.

"They always felt confident that was someone they could go to if there was a problem. He was someone they always felt like they could depend on."

Fletcher said Wood was also involved in the fair auctions in surrounding counties as well.

"It's hard to put a definition on someone like that when they're involved in so many ways," he said.

The legacy

Williams said Wood's generosity was based in his Christian faith and knowing the importance of giving back.

"He just at times almost had too big of a heart, if that's possible," he said. "But he sure taught a lot of people the right way to do things. He was just a legacy.

"This is our town and our county. We're proud of this community, and he just wanted to make it better," he said.

Through the years, Wood received numerous awards and was recognized for his contributions to the community, but he was humble, always claiming he could never match the generosity and grace shown to him through the years.

"Wise County has done more for me than I can ever do for it," he was known to say.

Clark said it will be strange to move forward without Wood.

"I've grown up here, and there's always been a James Wood. It feels like the end of an era," he said. "He was one of the Wise County legends who have been instrumental in the past decades to help shape this county and community into what it is.

"He's been such a huge part of the good things that have happened here for so long, but I think the best thing we can do is try to be more like that," he said. "That's the best way to remember and honor him ... to keep supporting this community and keep supporting our kids. The influence and attitude doesn't have to stop."

Wood: Leaving behind a legacy

Continued from page 1

his life and strive to have that type of commitment to our community."

James joined the military after high school and worked at Bell Helicopter in Hurst until a friend convinced him he should be in the car business.

It is ironic that one of the nation's top General Motors dealers began his career selling Fords in Bridgeport.

James and his wife Shirley operated Tanwood Motor Sales, a used car dealership in Decatur, for a decade until the local Buick, Oldsmobile, Pontiac and GMC dealership became available. General Motors came calling on Decatur's most successful used car dealer to take over the dealership and James Wood Motors became a reality.

James Wood Motors became the nation's largest GMC dealer in 1989, selling more than 3,000 new trucks. James Wood was the largest GMC truck dealer in Texas for more than a decade.

In 1983, James and Shirley built the current dealership facility. It was expanded in 1989 when the Chevrolet

franchise became available. U.S. Senator Phil Gramm was the keynote speaker at the dedication of the new facility.

For a short time, James also owned Decatur's Chrysler, Dodge, Jeep dealership until it was sold to Karl Klement in 1987.

James was named Decatur Citizen of the Year in 1989 for his many contributions to the community.

"He was a great model for other business people," said Decatur Mayor Martin Woodruff. "He's a good example of the successful businessman who contributes to the good and the welfare of the entire community."

He was also elected to the GM Presidents Dealer Advisory Council in 1987 and because of his dedication to the Fort Worth Stock Show was elected to its board of directors.

James' dedication to the Wise County Youth Fair is legendary. He was instrumental in founding the Champions and Blue Ribbon Club to buy projects at the fair. The group has raised more than \$1.4 million to

purchase projects since 2006.

He was an active buyer of animals at 4-H and FFA shows in Denton, Montague and Jack counties.

James served on the board of Wise Health System for a decade and was instrumental in the building of the main hospital on the East campus and the continued growth of the health care facility.

In 1990, General Motors asked James to consider buying a Buick/GMC dealership in Denton. The next year a Pontiac franchise was added to the Denton store.

In 1994, James and Shirley had the opportunity to buy the North Texas AutoPlex in Denton and added Chevrolet, Cadillac, Oldsmobile, Jeep, Eagle and Mazda to create the James Wood AutoPark. Later the Jeep, Eagle and Mazda franchises were sold.

James loved traveling, cutting horses, raising cattle and most of all spending time with his family and friends. Since his death, the Messenger social media pages have been flooded with memorials from public officials, customers of the dealership and current and former employees.

Remembering James

"My first personal dealings with him was when I was 16 years old and dad decided he was going to buy me a car. We went in and talked to James himself. I just recall he was personable and nice dealing with us that day and that made an impression on me as a 16-year-old ... I ended up working at the Auto Park in Denton and was there for six years. It was a great experience for me, learning how to deal with people the right way, how to do business the right way and be a professional ... learning to do business like him, shaking a man's hand, looking him in the eye, do as you say and say what you mean. Those are the kinds of things he instilled in his employees. "I know he always supported [the schools]. His name is all around. You see it on the programs, scoreboards and the sponsorships."

Charlie Tibbels, Decatur ISD School Board President

"He was a great man — genuinely a nice person. There's not many people you can say that about. But he was very benevolent to the community, was involved in a lot of things. He was active in the growth of the community. He put his time and his money into the city. He's going to be greatly missed. "He was a role model that we used a lot in meeting with people. He always did his part and some more ... He sold our community all over the Metroplex for years."

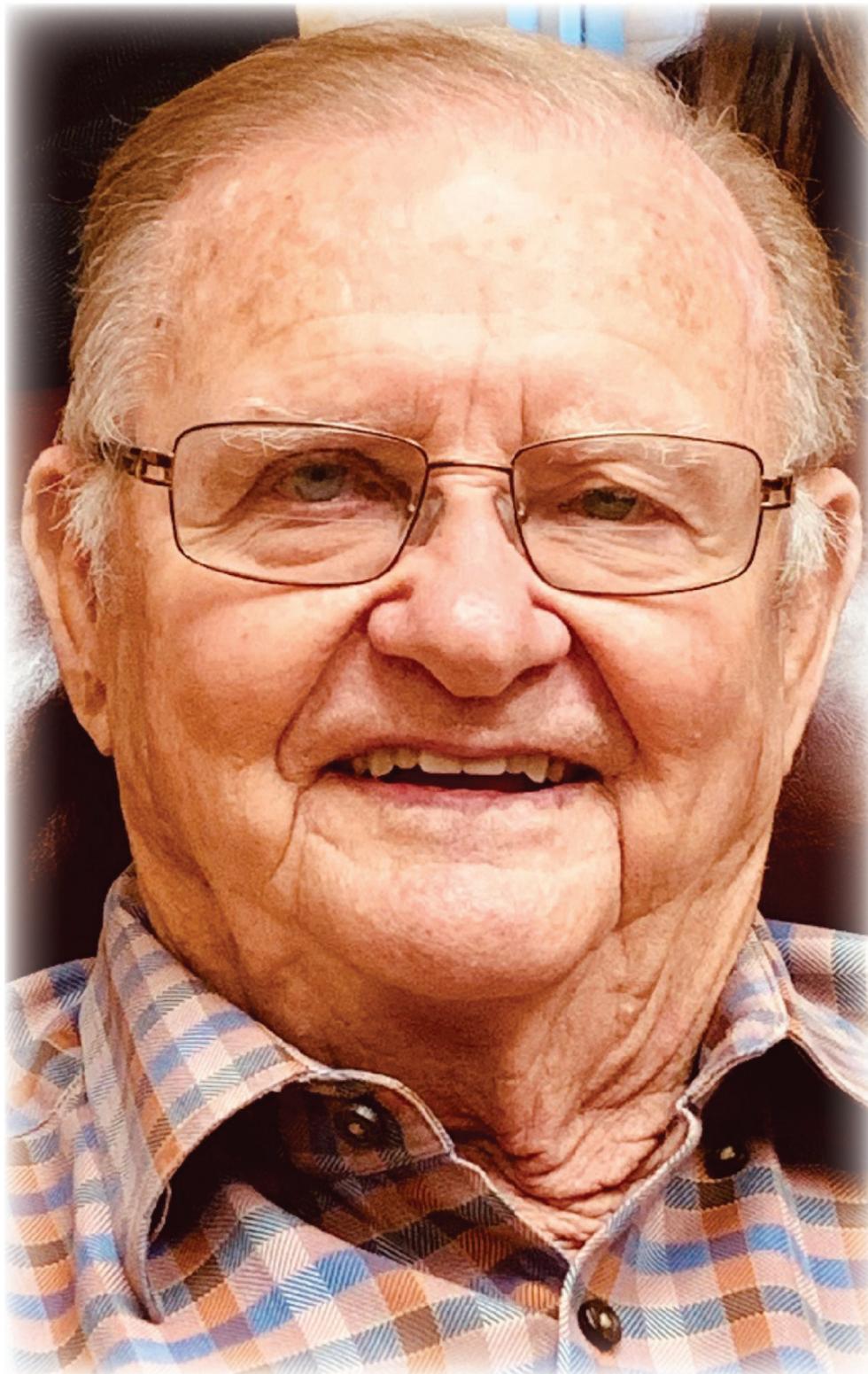
Thom Lambert, Decatur EDC Director

"Philanthropist, visionary, business icon, family man, leader, mentor ... there are unlimited words you could try to use to characterize James Wood and the legacy he has left behind. At the end of the day, he was a great man who strongly believed in God, family and community. James cherished his own family and the extended James Wood Motors family, and he truly led by example. All you have to do is look at the generations of families who have, and continue to, work for him. It is a powerful statement as to how he treated his employees and people in general and how much those people looked up to him and appreciated him. James would literally give you the shirt off of his back and his positive impact on Wise County over multiple decades will be hard to replace. However, through his actions, he has taught so many other companies and business owners what it means to give back to the communities that helped make you successful and to all do our part to leave the community better than you found it. His quick wit and contagious smile will be missed by so many, including me. My family and I offer our sincere condolences and prayers to the Wood family and to the extended James Wood Motors family."

Andrew Rottner, Executive Vice President First State Bank

"I worked for the Wood organization for several years in the 1990s, and I learned a lot from James. Over the years, it is amazing how many people's lives he has touched and always goes the extra mile to take care of a customer and the community of Wise County. It all started with James Wood Motors. There are dealerships around the Metroplex that built their organizations on doing it the 'James Wood Way.' A pioneer in the automotive business that will be missed by all."

Joe Redwine, Karl Klement General Manager



JAMES F. WOOD

1937-2020

Our friend and
customer for 47 years.

May we all reflect the generosity, kind
heart and common sense of James Wood.
Thank you for being a champion of this
community and its people.

You will be missed.



WISE COUNTY
MESSENGER

In Memoriam

JAMES
F.
WOOD

1937-2020



In remembrance of a visionary and
fiercely loyal friend for over 20 years.

A respected trailblazer in his industry, James believed in us during a critical time in our business. His handshake and his word were his trustworthy and integral bond. We are forever grateful and thank him for having confidence in us, and for his loyalty.

He will be greatly missed by many.

Your friends and colleagues at Vehicle Protection Structures (VPS),

John Saunders

Johan DeWaal
(1964-2006)

Wade White

& VPS Team

