James C. (Jim) Preston ’50, Ed.D. ’68, a former Cornell Cooperative Extension agent and professor emeritus of Rural Sociology at Cornell died on September 2, 2019 in Hector, New York He passed peacefully at his home while holding his bride’s hand. He was 92.

Jim was born October 14, 1926 in Friendship, New York, to the late Clarence and Livonia (Pierce) Preston. Losing his mother at a young age, he grew up in farming communities across the state, developing a lifelong interest in agriculture and rural community development. He graduated from Ithaca High School in 1944 and proudly enlisted in the U.S. Navy that same year, serving as a patrol craft radarman during WWII.

Following his honorable discharge from the service in 1946, Jim enrolled at Cornell and earned his bachelor’s degree from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS) in 1950 and began his career as a Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) agent that year. Jim loved traveling across the counties where he worked and knew every back road because he rarely took the same route twice. He was much appreciated by those he met, and with his knowledge and winning personality, Jim made many lifelong friends of the farmers
he served. Jim became a member of the Epsilon Sigma Phi honorary fraternity for extension professionals.

In 1951, while working in Steuben County, he met ‘the love of his life’ Gretta Robbins and they married in 1953 in Bath, New York. Having loved his time as a student at Cornell, and while starting a family, Jim continued his education, earning his master's degree from University of Wisconsin in 1959. By 1963, Jim and Gretta had welcomed three daughters into the world, and that year Jim accepted his dream job in Cornell Cooperative Extension at Cornell University, moving the family to Ithaca, New York. Jim's love of education continued, and he earned his Doctor of Education at Cornell in 1968. Dr. Preston accepted his 2nd dream job at Cornell as a professor in the Department of Rural Sociology (now Development Sociology), and at the same time became Director of the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development.

In 1977, Jim took over the Department of Development Sociology’s longstanding series, *The People of New York*, which were a series of bulletins for each county using decennial census data to profile the population and housing characteristics. Jim took the program in a new direction by designing the profiles to meet the program planning needs of county Cooperative Extension offices and christened the effort as the Population Information Program. And so a series of companion pamphlets, “The Application of Population Information to...” were developed and disseminated for program areas such as nutrition education, 4-H clubs, community resource development, and land use planning. When the 1980 *Census of Population and Housing* was released, the profiles were designed, printed and distributed along with a loose-leaf binder and came to be known as the PONY Notebook. PONY for People of New York.

Always closely involved with his home and school communities, Jim happily took leadership roles whenever called upon. He made friends everywhere he went and his commitment to church, Rotary, and Cornell Alumni Associations was unwavering. He was a member of the CCE Schuyler County board of directors, Alpha-Zeta fraternity, Naval Patrol Craft Association, Parkinson's Support Group and many others. Jim was honored to have been recognized
three times in Rotary as a Paul Harris Fellow, most recently in the week preceding his passing. Professor Preston retired to his home on Seneca Lake in 1988, and in recognition of his significant contributions to the university and rural communities throughout the state was named professor emeritus.

Jim developed the Empire State Food and Agricultural Leadership Institute (now LEAD New York) in 1983 and became its first director in 1985. His two-year pilot program for the institute was well-received and it continues today, having graduated 17 classes and more than 450 alumni who serve the food, agriculture and natural resource industries in a variety of leadership roles at the local, state, regional and national levels. Larry Van De Valk, current executive director of the program, said “I’ve had the relative advantage of learning from other program models, simply refining and building on an already solid program that I inherited from my predecessors. Jim had no such examples to follow; he created the foundation of the program and envisioned what it might become. Jim’s inaugural class set the bar high for all the classes that have followed, and his personal example of lifelong learning and servant leadership set the bar pretty high for me. His impact can be felt in our highly regarded program over three decades later.”

Through the years, Jim was a loyal supporter and regular attendee at the program’s biannual commencement ceremonies. Larry added: “I appreciate more, however, what Jim did for me personally rather than professionally. Each time we would see each other, he would not only ask me how things were going with the program, but he would also ask me how I was doing. Was I enjoying the work? Did I get the support I needed? Was there anything he could do to help? His genuine interest in me and my welfare was uplifting, and I appreciated it immensely. Jim was quite simply one of the nicest guys you could know.”

Jim had many hobbies, but loved time spent with his family the best. The family trips every summer will never be forgotten by his daughters. Unfailingly kind and loving, there were still rules to live by that Jim did not waver from and he instilled those values in 'his girls'. Cindy, Joan, and Barb could not have been prouder to call him
'Dad' for he was the best one ever. Jim shared his love of gardening, boating, hunting, fishing, archery, golf, square dancing, cards, horseback riding, and many other hobbies with anyone in the family with the same interests; those memories of his enthusiasm will remain forever. He remained an avid reader up until his death. Family as well as friends will remember Jim's love of most any Cornell sport, as well as any sport that had one of his children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren playing. He never missed a Cornell hockey game, if he could help it, and that went double for watching his family play any sport of their choice. His family will never forget the encouragement of his 'cheering' that could be heard like a foghorn across any playing field. Jim's love of traveling was shared with Gretta. They visited all 50 of the United States, on most trips using their motor home, including to Alaska and back. They did not stop their trips until Parkinson's disease forced Jim to slow down in his 80's. There was 'no quit' in the man as he did everything 'right' in managing his Parkinson's, rather than let Parkinson's manage him. He will forever be an example to his family of the best way to deal with what life hands you!

A colleague of Jim’s, Robin Blakely-Armitage, had the privilege of knowing him both as a great neighborhood dad to her friend Barb, and as an emeritus faculty member of the department she joined two decades later. “Dr. Preston was consistently committed to and engaged with the people around him, whether it was his family, neighbors, colleagues, or the communities he lived and worked in. He lived not only a long life, but a broad life. He truly embraced it all and serves as inspiration for those of us focused on impactful extension and outreach work.”

Survivors include Jim’s wife of 66 years, Gretta; sister, Ruth White ’46 of Cary, North Carolina; three daughters, Cynthia Hagin ’79 and Joan Denmark, both of Trumansburg, New York, and Barbara Yaeger of Cumming, Georgia; several grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

*Written by Larry Van De Valk (chair), Robin Blakely-Armitage, and Warren Alfred Brown*