Red Steagall is not a name dropper but he is a storyteller. Names of music legends, Western artists, legendary ranchers and top-hand cowboys flow through a conversation as easily as the average person talks about a friend or neighbors down the road. Red can do that because for six decades he has lived that close to the heartbeat of country music, cowboy culture and the ranching lifestyle.

Maybe that’s why it seems out of place that the Western music icon’s first major hit song climbed the charts as a rhythm and blues single by Ray Charles. That was 1967 after Dean Martin agreed to include “Here We Go Again” on a new album and then decided not to take a chance on a country song. Red dealt with the disappointment and pitched the song to Ray Charles. The rest is music history.

Red Steagall has made a lifetime of turning disappointments into opportunities and adapting to the unexpected. He was a Texas Panhandle kid who wanted to be a veterinarian and start his dream with a football scholarship to the only school in Texas with a College of Veterinary Medicine.

Russell Don Steagall, the guy everyone called “Red,” was a standout athlete on the football field and rode bulls in the rodeo arena. Texas A&M University actually offered the Sanford native a football scholarship in 1954 when he was a junior left end for the Phillips High School Blackhawks. That was step one of his plan to be a large animal vet.

Growing up in the small town of Sanford surrounded by cow country for hundreds of miles, a kid could easily see himself as a rodeo cowboy. The Western lifestyle was everywhere. Red and his four brothers played on river bottom land south of the Canadian River and watched as local cowboys rode horseback to work cattle on nearby ranches.

Red was born in 1938 in Gainesville, Texas, as the first of six children. George Russell Steagall and his wife Ruth moved to the rugged countryside of Sanford when the red-headed firstborn was 3 years old. Red’s mother was a public schoolteacher and his father worked in a variety of jobs including the oil fields.

BY SUE HANCOCK JONES
“I was the oldest and mother depended on me for things that you wouldn’t necessarily depend on a child from 5 to 15,” Red said. “There were times when Daddy was out of a job and mother was pregnant, and we didn’t have any money to feed the babies. In those days you could get 4 cents for returning a Coke bottle. It was six miles from Sanford to the Fritch-to-Borger highway. I would walk both sides of that highway picking up Coke bottles and then use that money to buy bread and milk for those babies.”

When Red was 5 years old, his mother gave him a grocery list, and he walked four miles one way to the grocery, gave the list to the grocer and walked another four miles home with the groceries. When he was 7 years old, his mother began to leave all the kids with him while one of the men in town took her to the grocery because she didn’t have a car.

“Mother thought I could do anything,” Red said. “I just knew it had to be done. Mother couldn’t do it. Daddy wasn’t there. I was the oldest and it was my responsibility.”

Eventually Red had a paper route and a bicycle made from parts at the city dump. He worked hard to earn enough money for a new 26-inch green Western Flyer bicycle. He finally got the bicycle but carelessly left it in front of the house. “Then Daddy came home and ran over it. I was just distraught sittin’ out on the front stoop,” he said.

About that time the school janitor came by the house, saw the mangled bicycle and sat down beside Red. “Russell Don,” he said, “I want you to remember one thing. The good things that happen to you today are to make life pleasant. The things that happen to you that are bad are to toughen you up for tomorrow. You’ll be tougher tomorrow because of that bicycle and your mistake.”

“I never forgot that,” Red said. “Even today if something doesn’t go the way I want it to, I don’t think I’ve made a mistake. I’ve had a learning experience.” Red has had a lot of learning experiences.

WHEN EVERYTHING CHANGED

On the day of the first football game of his junior year, he wasn’t on the field. He was in the hospital. It was September 1954. His parents divorced in August, leaving Ruth with five children and one on the way. Red had a bad night of fever, chills and excruciating pain in his head. At the hospital, he was diagnosed with polio. Almost immediately the virus drastically affected the muscles in his left arm and he was told that the disease would spread to his left leg. Four days after the diagnosis, Ruth gave birth to Red’s youngest brother.

Because no private bed was available for Red in the hospital, he had to sleep on a bed in a large ward where iron lungs lined the walls and pumped breath into polio victims with paralyzed chest muscles. Like embryos in metal wombs, they struggled to breathe, and the haunting sound of their breathing and the pumping
Russell Don (Red) Steagall
2018 NATIONAL GOLDEN SPUR AWARD RECIPIENT

Russell Don (Red) Steagall is the 41st name on a list of National Golden Spur Award recipients who have been honored since the award was established in 1978. The award is the most prestigious honor given by the ranching and livestock industries in recognition of accomplishments by a single individual.

The award recognizes iconic industry leaders whose unparalleled devotion to land and livestock has earned them the notable respect and admiration of their peers. The award is also meant to emphasize the humanistic, scientific and/or technological contributions of the ranching and livestock industries to society.

“Red Steagall has spent a lifetime telling the story of ranching,” explained Jim Bret Campbell, Executive Director of the National Ranching Heritage Center. The center annually hosts the award dinner, which is scheduled for 6 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 13 at the Overton Hotel in Lubbock, Texas.

“Through his music, poetry, syndicated radio show and television show, Red has helped ensure that the stories of the real West don’t just fade into obscurity,” Campbell said. “His work keeps the rancher and cowboy in front of a mainstream audience. Even more important, Red reflects the values, integrity and character that have always been part of ranch life. He’s authentic and that resonates with everyone who appreciates this ranching heritage.”

Steagall has held celebrity status since the 1970s as a Western entertainer who emphasizes ranch life, Western heritage and cowboy values. The popular Red Steagall Cowboy Gathering and Western Swing Festival has been held every October for the past 27 years in Fort Worth. His radio show is carried by 155 stations in 34 states, and he records 26 new episodes a year of “Red Steagall Is Somewhere West of Wall Street,” a television show that appears on RFD-TV. The cable network provides family-friendly entertainment dedicated to serving the needs and interests of rural America.

“The ranching community is a very unique society,” Steagall said. “That fence between neighbors means a barrier for your cattle. It doesn’t mean that a difference of opinion is going to make enemies out of you. Hollywood invented so many stories that aren’t true. By being able to go out and work on those big ranches, I learned about the true set of values of those cowboys.

“It’s very important that we record in our songs and poems and in our literature—our prose—exactly what it’s all about because 50 years from today, as fast as our society moves, what we write today will be the only reference that those people have to the way we live and who we really are. It’s so important to me to get it as authentic as possible.”

Six ranching and livestock organizations sponsor the annual award: American Quarter Horse Association, National Cattlemen’s Foundation, Ranching Heritage Association, Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association, Texas Cattle Feeders Association and Texas Farm Bureau.

To make reservations for the 41st Annual National Golden Spur Award dinner, view http://ranchingheritage.org/spur or call (806) 834-0469.
sound of the iron cylinders have stayed with Red to this day.

That night in the hospital ward, Red made a promise to God. “If you let me live through this,” he said, “I’ll never complain about anything for the rest of my life.”

When Red got home with his limp arm, the coaches put him in the whirlpool at the field house every day and his mother bought him a $10 used mandolin. She paid it off a dollar a month. Red rode his bicycle four miles each way every day to take mandolin lessons and concentrated on one finger at a time to rebuild strength in his hand. When he could play a two- or three-finger chord, his mother helped him buy a guitar for graduation.

The Phillips High School Blackhawks went on to win the state championship that year. Since Red couldn’t play football anymore, he had to give up his scholarship. “The Junction Boys” under Texas A&M coach Bear Bryant won the Southwest Conference and produced a Heisman Trophy winner during the years when Red would have been a Texas Aggie.

After his polio diagnosis, Red realized his dream had to change but doesn’t remember ever thinking, “Why did that thing happen to me?” Instead, he remembers thinking, “Well, that happened to me. Now I’ve gotta do somethin’ about it.” Red saw that he was no longer like everybody else. He couldn’t play football. He couldn’t pole vault. He couldn’t do the things he had most enjoyed, but he could still have a good life. And he could still ride bulls if he tied his left arm to his body to keep from being disqualified for touching the bull.

The debilitating disease never spread to his leg. Maybe it was all the hours in the whirlpool and all the hours riding his bicycle to mandolin lessons. Russell Don Steagall didn’t get to choose his circumstances. In the defining years of his life, he could only choose his response. What he did was make a career out of throwing his limp left arm onto the neck of his guitar and grasping the strings with his fingers. Today the original second-hand mandolin that helped make all this possible is on exhibit at the High Plains Western Heritage Center in Spearfish, S.D. Red loaned it to the museum when they honored him as Cowboy Poet of the Year.

Over time he’s been inducted into the Hall of Great Westerners at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, the Texas Country Music Hall of Fame, the Texas Heritage Songwriter’s Hall of Fame, and the Texas Trail of Fame in the historic Fort Worth Stockyards. He also received the Charles Goodnight Award as an individual who personifies the ideals of the Old West, and the Texas Legislature made him the official Cowboy Poet of Texas in 1991. In 2006, he became the only cowboy poet ever named Poet Laureate of Texas in the 68-year history of the honorary appointment.

“SHE MADE ME BELIEVE”

“I learned to adapt, and I think that’s the greatest lesson I got from polio,” Red said. “Nothing really scares me because I know there’s a way around it. Mother wanted me to do whatever I wanted to do, and she made me believe I could. She made me believe that I was exceptional and that I had certain talents that nobody else had. She taught all of us that all of our lives…. There’s one thing I still do to this day. If I’m going to make a decision, I think, ‘What would Mother think about that?’”

During his second year at what was then West Texas State University in Canyon, Red realized that being a large-animal vet with only one arm would probably mean getting himself hurt or somebody killed. That’s when he decided to get a degree in animal science with what he describes as “a lot of classes in agronomy.” To finance his college studies, he played local dances and clubs with the guitar his mother helped him buy for graduation.

One of Red’s best friends in those early years and throughout his life was Donnie Lanier. They had grown up together until Donnie’s father got transferred to a plant in Dumas. At Dumas High
School, Donnie met Jimmy Bowen and they formed a band called “Buddy Knox—Jimmy Bowen and the Rhythm Orchids.”

“They became the biggest rockabilly group in the business,” Red said. “By the time I got to West Texas State, I knew I could do that [perform]. I met Buddy Holly and all the other acts that were big. I went over to Norman Petty Studio, cut a record and started that dream—started writing songs.”

After graduation in 1960, Red worked for five years as an agricultural chemicals salesman while writing songs and playing with a country band. One morning Donnie and Jimmy called him from Hollywood and said, “Get out here. We need some help. We need people we can depend on.”

“Jimmy was the biggest producer in the business,” Red said, “so I went out there. I had a brand new 1964 Super Sport Impala convertible. I hooked a 5- by 7-foot U-Haul trailer on it, put everything I owned in that trailer and went west to California.”

He sang locally while continuing to work for a year selling agricultural chemicals. His sales office was a 2.5-hour drive on the Los Angeles Freeway from the apartment he shared with Donnie. After a long drive on the crowded freeway, Red came home one day frustrated and mad, picked up the mail and walked upstairs to the apartment.

“Donnie’s bedroom was on one side of the apartment and mine was on the other,” Red said. “Donnie was sitting there on the edge of his bed with his guitar, staring at the phone and I said, ‘What are you doing, Donnie?’”

“Oh, this little melody has been rolling around in my head and I don’t know what to do with it,” Donnie answered. Then the phone rang. Rather than deal with another business call that late in the day, Donnie refused to take the call. “Here we go again,” he said. Within minutes the two roommates had the words to that melody in Donnie’s head and “Here We Go Again” was born.

SONGWRITING SUCCESS

The song was Red’s biggest commercial success as a songwriter. After the Ray Charles hit record, Nancy Sinatra recorded a single of the song and made the Top 40. Dean Martin made a single the next year and got in the Top 10. Then Glen Campbell released it in an album, and the song snowballed, taking on a life of its own. “Here We Go Again” has been recorded 63 times.

Red’s success as a songwriter led to a job in the music division of United Artists where Red oversaw the music of several successful films with great music scores—“In the Heat of the Night” and “Midnight Cowboy.” With money in his pocket, Red eventually decided to move to Nashville where a cowboy might find music more in tune with his lifestyle.

Since his 1967 hit song, Red has had more than 200 of his compositions recorded both by himself and other artists, released 23 albums and recorded 26 consecutive records that have tracked on the national charts. He became one of the top entertainers on the rodeo circuit and for many years played more than 250 dates a year. Red played dance halls and rodeos all over the West with his band “The Coleman County Cowboys.”

“Nothing really scares me because I know there’s a way around it.”

Red joined the Rancheros Visitadores (“Visiting Ranchers”) equestrian group when he lived in California and continues to be part of the group. He is pictured here (bottom left) with members Ronald Reagan, Gene Autry and Don Edwards in the 1980s.
While attending the National Finals Rodeo in Oklahoma City in 1974, he heard Reba McEntire sing the national anthem. “I thought she had the purest voice I’d ever heard,” Red said. “She had total control and emotion that was raw. She was 19 years old and hadn’t been influenced by anything except herself.”

Red had Reba’s mother bring her to Nashville. “Glenn Sutton and I had just written a song on a caboose on The Rock Island Railroad from Amarillo to Memphis. It’s called ‘I’m Not Your Kind of Girl,’ so I used that song and one other song to cut a demo with her,” Red said. The demo got Reba a record deal and sealed a friendship that keeps the two in touch “all the time,” according to Red. “I don’t have a better friend in the world.”

Gail Page Steagall is probably an exception to that statement. Red’s been known to call his wife his best friend, but they did go for years calling each other “cousin.” Gail was married to Red’s cousin, who died in a car accident six weeks after their wedding. She stayed a part of the family and kept in touch for years.

COMING HOME TO TEXAS

Red knew exactly what he was doing when he left Nashville and came to Fort Worth in 1977. “Gail was here,” he said. They married in Austin at the home of Darrell and Edith Royal, and together they raised the two sons Red had adopted during his previous marriage. The Steagalls have been married 41 years but they’ve known each other 57 years.

For the first 20 years of their marriage, the couple lived in the barn near the entrance to the ranch. Today a deputy sheriff and his family live there to help care for the ranch and its livestock. Red and Gail live up the road in a house with a front that literally came out of the pages of Southern Living magazine.

For years Gail collected photos of homes and rooms she liked and essentially served as architect and interior designer of the home she dreamed they would have. In addition to their home and barn, the Steagall ranch includes a sizeable office building, pastures and livestock.

The house is filled with memorabilia from their life together, and the office building is a mini-museum of Western history, including an enormous 1879 photo of the entrance to Tule Canyon and the first 5,000 steers brought to the Southern Plains of Texas.

The cowboy icon lines the walls of his home and office not only with pictures of his friends but also
paintings by his friends. As he approaches his 80th birthday, his walls—like his music and poetry—tell stories. Directly behind his desk is a painting of cowboy artist Bill Owen by Western artist Tom Browning, a recent winner of the prestigious Prix de West Award. Owen died in 2013 on the same day Browning drew his portrait. Red owns one of three copies.

Inside his home, Red has Bill Owen’s painting, “Born to This Land,” a depiction of an Arizona rancher and his son waiting for the arrival of the last few head of cattle. Owen was inspired by Red’s poem of the same name. The recording won the Western Heritage Wrangler Award from the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum—one of 11 Wrangler Awards on Red’s bookshelves. One shelf couldn’t hold them all.

Within an arm’s reach of Owen’s painting is a large “Code of the West” bronze sculpture by Western artist Herb Mignery. The sculpture is one of several created for the Code of the West Foundation, not for sell but for presentation to prominent institutions or individuals who believe the values of the American West should be preserved and celebrated.

The inscription underneath the sculpture reads: “In Honor of Red Steagall, Keeper of the Code—A Man to Ride the River With.” On the Western trail, the phrase “he’ll do to ride the river with” was one of the highest compliments paid to a cowman of good character. Whatever else Red has in his life, good character must surely be at the top of the list.