

2025 Spirit of Texas Award Winner **R.W. Hampton**

By Callie Holton

Each year, Texas selects a few of its best cowboys for the Texas Cowboy Hall of Fame. These men and women have spent their lives devoted to the uniqueness of Texas and the Western way of life. The award recognizes individuality, achievement, style, innovation, and forward-thinking Texans, and this year, an Amarillo resident has been chosen. R.W. Hampton will receive the 2025 Spirit of Texas Award.

America's fascination with cowboy culture is alive and well, but it isn't just a romanticized ideal in the Texas Panhandle. R.W. Hampton embodies the reality of this way of life, seamlessly blending his career as a working cowboy with the version of the West that captivates audiences in film, television, and music. From ranching to storytelling, he has lived the cowboy life while bringing it to others through music and on stage and screen, offering an authentic connection between history, tradition, and modern pop culture.

A lifelong Texan born in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, Hampton explained that he knew early on that this would be his career. "When I left high school, I wanted to be a cowboy," he said. That ambition took him from New Mexico's ranges to the Texas Panhandle plains, working on some of the state's most well-known legacy ranches. "Part of my experience was working for ranches along the Canadian River. I worked at the old Quien Sabe up around Channing, then the LS down around Boys Ranch, and neighbored for many other ranches in the area."

Although R.W. wouldn't make a permanent move to Amarillo with his family until 2019, he shared, "I never felt like an outsider in Amarillo. It always felt like home."

Amarillo has long been the city that rural populations converge upon to shop, dine, receive medical care, and find entertainment. "Starting way back then," R.W. shared of his days as a young cowboy, "The town you went to was Amarillo. It was the big hub. We'd come into town and go to Oliver Saddle Shop and then Bob Marr's Stockman Supply. Amarillo was our town."

Working as a cowboy was hard, but R.W. enjoyed the long days of living his dream. When the day was done,



he unwound under the stars and around campfires as generations of cowboys had before him with another of his passions - writing and playing music. "I always had an old guitar. I never was much of a card player in the evening, so I played my guitar."

R.W. recalls the break his old guitar would give him, forever shaping his career trajectory: "It was about 1979," he said. "I was just in my twenties, and Kenny Rogers came through to make a 90-minute TV special called *Kenny Rogers and the American Cowboy*. And somehow I was used a lot in that special, riding, playing guitar and singing. I was famous for one night! But my life did not change; I just kept working for the ranches and going about life."

Though it was a fleeting taste of fame, it planted a seed. "At the time, people would say, 'Oh, you're never going to see another poor day, the phone's going to ring off the wall!'" he laughed.

Although that wasn't the case, there was still plenty of work to be found as a real cowboy. "I always kept my foot in ranching. At some point, I quit being a full-time cowboy for one single outfit and became what we call a day working cowboy, where smaller ranches would need work for shorter amounts of time. I was doing that and trying to keep my foot in show business. Honestly, I





▲ R.W. bull riding during his high school rodeo days

► On set for *Wild Horses*, left to right: Ben Johnson, R.W. Hampton, Richard Masur, Jack Rader, and Richard "Dick" Farnsworth

▼ R.W., Lisa, and Ethan at home in Amarillo.
Photo by Mira 3 Photography



realized that as much as I loved the cowboy and ranching life, I was never gonna have anything. You really gotta love it. You do it for the love of it because a lot of times there's more month than money as a cowboy."

A few years later, the phone on R.W.'s wall rang with another Hollywood call. Kenny Rogers' manager had determinedly tracked him down - before cell phones and the internet, finding a wandering cowboy was no small feat. R.W. recalls, "He said, 'We're doing a CBS Movie of the Week. It's not one of his Gambler movies; it's a modern-day Western. We were looking at the footage from the special, and Kenny said, 'Let's get R.W. back here!'"

"In fact," R.W. chuckled, "the credits say *R.W. Hampton, as himself*. And that's where I got reintroduced." Although the fame was once again short-lived, *Wild*



Horses gave R.W. the valuable opportunity to learn from and build relationships with iconic industry talent like Buck Taylor from *Gunsmoke*, Academy Award Nominee Richard Farnsworth, and Ben Johnson, the world-champion cowboy who won an Oscar for *The Last Picture Show*. "Being around those guys, I thought, 'There's a link between ranching and the entertainment business.' Sure, to me, one was way over here, and the other was way over there. And if you really want a ranch, you've got to wait 'til you're a kazillionaire! A lot of things have got to happen... but I could see how these two could come together."

In the following years, R.W. did just that. He worked ranches throughout the American West, including Nevada, Oregon, and Wyoming. Invitations to play music in public became more frequent, as did calls to audition for film and television roles.

Jim Jennings has known R.W. Hampton for many years, and as the former publisher and historian for the *American Quarter Horse Journal*, he knows a thing or two about the Western way of life. "The thing about R.W.," Jim said, "is that he's not just a cowboy singer, he's a cowboy. He worked on some of the big historic ranches in the Panhandle and in eastern New Mexico long before becoming famous for his music. He has started colts, dragged calves to the branding fire, and roped and doctored cattle in the pasture. And if you listen to his music, you'll be able to pick up on all of that."

Eventually, R.W. made a leap of faith to be a full-time entertainer, a choice that would ultimately give him the flexibility and the resources to pursue his dream of owning his own place.

"I was born and raised in Texas, so why ranch in New Mexico, right?" R.W. teased. "I always joke that Colfax County was a part of Texas during Sam Houston's time.

So I just tell people it's the part of New Mexico that used to be Texas."

R.W. and his wife Lisa lived on their Miami, New Mexico, ranch for many years with their kids, traveling to Amarillo for resources just as R.W. had done as a young cowboy. "About once a month, after school got out on Friday, we'd all load up and come to Amarillo. Of course, we love to eat out; we'd stay in a hotel and maybe see the latest movie, and the next morning, we would go to Sam's or Walmart, load up with all kinds of stuff we needed, and head back."

Lisa, a former real estate agent from Central Oregon, had a revelation. R.W. shared, "She said, 'For the amount of money we spend on hotel rooms, we could buy a little house here.' Next thing I know, we were riding around with the realtor."

Although R. W. felt at home in Amarillo, he wasn't as familiar with a home that included next-door neighbors. "I hadn't lived in a town since 1975, since I graduated from high school in Richardson! So I told her, 'I at least want a place with some history, some kind of feeling to it.'"

The couple found a 1921 Craftsman in Oliver Eakle with just the charm they sought, if not the space. "This area is just wonderful. The old red brick streets take me back to when I was a kid, visiting my grandparents in little Texas towns." They took on a major renovation to make the home their own.

"Originally, we planned to spend most of our time at our ranches," Hampton admits. "But Amarillo just became home." The transition happened naturally when New Mexico's schools shut down during the pandemic. Enrolling their last school-aged child at Amarillo's Ascension Academy made perfect sense.

The Hamptons were already involved in Amarillo's Western community, and proximity only strengthened their commitments. As a long-time supporter of the Working Ranch Cowboys Association (WRCA), he has participated in the WRCA Ranch Rodeo Finals for 30 years. R.W. and Lisa are members of the Palo Duro Corral of Westerners International, which celebrates the history, lore, myth, and culture of the American West. Additionally, the Hamptons' involvement with the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA) runs deep—all of the family's horses are AQHA-registered, and they have been active in fundraising efforts to support the organization's mission of preserving and promoting the American Quarter Horse.

Amarillo has even played a role in Hampton's film career. He worked with the local production company



▲ R.W. horseback at Clearview Ranch. Photo by Jaymie Dunlap Photography

◀ R.W. eating at Dick Shepherd's Wagon, Quien Sabe Ranch, near Channing, Texas, circa 1979

Sharpened Iron Studios, appearing alongside Hollywood stars Anne Heche and Kellen Lutz in *What Remains*. In fact, recently, technology has made it simple to

answer casting calls from the comfort of his hometown. "I have done auditions where people call me up and say, 'Hey, I want to send you part of a script; it's for a character named Bob. Why don't you read this scene, just put your phone up and film it?' Then I'll send it to them. I've gotten several jobs that way."

He keeps returning to Amarillo because Amarillo's people resonate with his core values. "It's a common-sense community," he said. "It's not just anybody who can live in a place like this—one day we get a foot of snow, the next it's 85 degrees. You have to be resilient."

R.W. and Lisa have built a life in Amarillo with their six kids and seven grandchildren, attending First Baptist Church, making social connections, and investing in additional properties to remodel and rent out.

At this stage of life, R.W. has worked more ranches than most people can name, acted in over a dozen film roles, and released fourteen Western and gospel music albums. Perhaps his proudest creative venture is *The Last Cowboy*, a one-man play he wrote with his brother Jeff, a Texas writer and playwright David Marshall Marquis, in 1993. In *The Last Cowboy*, his love for storytelling through music and stage culminated in a one-man play chronicling the evolution of the

American cowboy. Interestingly enough, this historical monologue of an aging cowboy laced with original song was set in (a then faraway) year 2025. Premiering in Dallas at the Anatole Theater, he performed it across the US coast to coast, including here in Amarillo; the Smithsonian endorsed the production for its historical perspective.

In 1999, Lisa convinced Hampton to let her produce an album inspired by the play, winning the coveted Wrangler Award from the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City, and he remains hopeful for a future film adaptation. “I think at my age, I could bring a little something different to it,” he mused. “I’ve lived a lot more life since then.”

This spring will have R.W. at the movie premier of *Sod and Stubble*, a film written and directed by Ken Spurgeon and based on the book by the same name written by John Ise with additional material by Von Rothenberger. *Sod and Stubble* tells the story of German immigrants settling in Kansas post-Civil War. “I play the role of an old doctor named Doc Poole,” Hampton said. “It’s set in the late 1800s, and I think it captures the grit and determination of that era.”

R.W. Hampton’s induction into the Texas Cowboy Hall of Fame for the 2025 Spirit of Texas Award recipient will add another accolade to his growing list, including The Western Music Hall of Fame and receiving the Chester A Reynolds Award from the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in 2021. The TCHF ceremony will occur in Fort Worth at Billy Bob’s Texas on March 27, 2025. The Spirit of Texas Award celebrates Hampton’s dedication to preserving and promoting the cowboy way of life through his music, storytelling, and personal endeavors. Hampton will join a

prestigious line of past recipients, including George Strait, Willie Nelson, Red Steagall, and Cody Johnson.

Jim Jennings is a long-time fan of R.W.’s music and couldn’t be happier for his friend to receive this recognition for his talent. “R.W. sings cowboy music, but it’s almost as if he has a right to,” Jim said. “He knows what cowboying is because he’s done it. For that matter, he’s still cowboying on his ranches in New Mexico. He may live in town, but R.W. is still a cowboy.”

In 2025, R.W. Hampton is living his own version of the story he once envisioned in *The Last Cowboy*. The play captured the evolution of the cowboy, a life shaped by the land, tradition, and time. Hampton continues to share that legacy with the world. And as long as he has a guitar in hand and a story to tell, he will continue to embody the spirit of the true cowboy—from right here in Amarillo. *AW*

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