

Jim Stuckenberg is creating a new world champion trophy for AQHA.



JENNIFER K. HANCOCK

JIM STUCKENBERG

The former racehorse trainer has become one of the world's foremost Western artists.

By Michael Cusortelli

JIM STUCKENBERG IS A MAN WHO DIDN'T LET FATE FOUL UP HIS dream. Deaf since birth, the 61-year-old Missouri native has parlayed his affection for horses and the Western lifestyle into his position as one of the world's most famed equine artists.

An avid horse lover as far back as he can recall, Stuckenberg began his equine art career as a youngster, but his drawings took on more depth when he was given his first American Quarter Horse. He's come quite a ways since those first doodles on scratch paper. Nowadays, Stuckenberg's work is on display at such sites as the Glenbow Museum in Calgary and the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa. One of his oil paintings, "Stagecoach," hangs in the executive office of the Wells Fargo Bank headquarters in Los Angeles, and two of his paintings decorated the Oval Office of the White House in the 1980s when Ronald Reagan was president.

And last March, during the AQHA Convention in Seattle, the Racing Committee commissioned Stuckenberg to create a new world champion's trophy.

Gateway Roots

STUCKENBERG WAS BORN AND RAISED IN ST. LOUIS, WHICH FITS because Missouri's largest city has long been known as the "Gateway to the West." He was educated at Central Institute for the Deaf in St. Louis, where he learned lip reading and speech. Stuckenberg is an avid fan of the Cardinals baseball team – in fact, when he was growing up in the '50s his neighbors included Cardinal legends and Hall of Fame members Stan "The Man" Musial and Red Schoendienst. Long an admirer of Stuckenberg's work, Musial has several of his paintings in his St. Louis home.

Stuckenberg's family migrated to California in 1960, when Jim was 15. He attended Fresno State University, where he was a member of the rodeo team and earned a B.S. in animal science, with a minor in art. Because he was deaf, when he rode broncs or bulls he couldn't hear the buzzer when his eight seconds was up – so he just kept riding, and a clown or an arena hand would wave a flag at him to get him to stop riding.

Stuckenberg made his first sculpture during his senior year. While at Fresno State, he also became acquainted with AQHA Past President Bill Verdugo, who at that time was an animal sciences professor at the university. Verdugo befriended Stuckenberg and eventually hired the young graduate to work at his horse farm.

Obtaining his trainer's license in 1971, Stuckenberg embarked on a career as a racehorse conditioner. Some of the more noteworthy runners in his care included Twounder (TB), a gelding by 1979 California Derby winner Beau's Eagle who in '93 equaled the 5 1/2-furlong track record at Golden Gate Fields.

"I bought Twounder from an old friend who'd had him at the track," Stuckenberg recalls. "The horse had a bowed tendon, and I remember seeing him racing in a \$6,250 claiming race and not doing very well.

"His owners had pretty much given up on him, and that's how I got him," he adds. "I gradually moved him up from \$6,250 to the \$25,000 claiming level. He won an overnight stakes for me on the turf, and then he equaled that track record in an allowance race."

One of Stuckenberg's most well-known Quarter Horses was Wine Sipper, a Sir Rambler stallion bred by AQH Hall of Fame member Spencer Childers and who traced to champion Black Easter Bunny. Stuckenberg claimed Wine Sipper for \$3,200 during the summer of his 4-year-old season, and trained the versatile sprinter to win at distances ranging from 400 to 870 yards.

Even though he was a mere claimer, Wine Sipper had a personality all his own.

"I worked for my dad all summer when I was 15, and I knew all about Wine Sipper," remembers Stuckenberg's son Will. "He was a horse with a lot of character. All of the trainers and people at the track used to come by his stall to see him. We kept him in a stall next to the tack room, and he was always playing with buckets and trying to get the attention of anyone he could.

"He was very gentle for a stud horse – I would even put kids on him," Will recalls. "I used to ride him around the barn area in a halter and lead rope, and then he'd run in a race the next day. That gives you an idea of how laid back he was."

Stuckenberg more recently campaigned Kelseys Big Sister, a daughter of the Dash For Cash stallion Barrymore. He acquired the mare in a private transaction in 2003, turned her over to trainer George Simpson, and in her third start for her new connections, she won a \$5,000 claiming dash at the San Mateo County Fair meet at Bay Meadows. At age 7 in '04, she won two 350-yard claimers sprints on the California fair circuit before she was retired the following year.

Major Career Move

IN 1984, STUCKENBERG GAVE UP HIS TRAINER'S LICENSE TO devote more time to his art work, which was just starting to gain more and more popularity among collectors.

"I enjoyed training, but my art began to take up more of my time," he recalled. "I just started doing more and more sculptures and paintings."

Stuckenberg met Ronald Reagan through a mutual friend, one-time California Horse Racing Board member Ray Seeley, when the future president was still governor of the state. He has given Reagan and his widow, Nancy, four paintings, two of which are in the former First Lady's home in Bel Air, California. Stuckenberg also did a bronze of

Reagan on the president's favorite riding horse.

Stuckenberg's work has also adorned the homes of noted trainer D. Wayne Lukas and actors Fess Parker, who played Daniel Boone in the long-running 1960s television series by that name, and Duncan Renaldo, who portrayed The Cisco Kid on TV in the '50s. One of his pen-and-ink drawings, "Runaway Chuck Wagon," once was the property of the late Indira Gandhi, who twice in the 20th century was prime minister of India.

Stuckenberg lives in Templeton, California, with his second wife, Anita, and 16-year-old son Danny. He has two grown sons, Will and David, from a first marriage. Stuckenberg's family includes four grandchildren, with another on the way. Will and David both work with their father in the art business – Will owns his own business, from which he sells western-themed bronzes, and David is also a commercial airline pilot.

As a child, Stuckenberg admired the work of Charles Marion Russell, the famed cowboy artist of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Fittingly, one of Russell's kin owns some of Stuckenberg's paintings.

"He is horse crazy," said Los Alamitos-based trainer Curley Ortiz, Stuckenberg's friend who also trained Kelseys Big Sister. "He's also a heck of a good guy who's done a lot of great things in his life."

He has indeed – and he's not done yet. 🐾



Ronald Reagan was an early fan of Stuckenberg's art.

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