

# Red River Dave McEneary

**McEneary, “Red River Dave”:** Born in San Antonio on December 15, 1914, David McEneary rose to national fame as a singing cowboy on radio and television. He was especially known for writing songs that celebrated actual events, including his popular tune “Amelia Earhart’s Last Flight.”

As a teenager, McEneary attended Brackenridge High School in San Antonio and sang on local radio stations KABC and KKYX. By the time he was sixteen, he left his hometown to pursue a musical career, riding freight trains and working a number of odd jobs to make ends meet, including as a migrant farm worker and a singer in restaurants. It was during this time that McEneary earned the nickname “Red River Dave,” because he often performed the song “Red River Valley.”

In 1937, McEneary released his biggest hit, “Amelia Earhart’s Last Flight” a song capitalizing on the nation’s obsession with aviation pioneer Amelia Earhart’s mysterious disappearance. In 1939, McEneary made history with the first commercial country music broadcast on television when he performed the Amelia Earhart song at the World’s Fair in New York.

McEneary served as an infantryman during World War II, after which he moved to California and appeared in several western films. In 1952, he returned to San Antonio and hosted a television show on WOAI-TV for seven years and did some broadcasting on the border radio station, XERF. For a time, McEneary withdrew from the musical profession and worked as a real estate agent. After his wife of 35 years died in 1974, he relocated to Nashville, Tennessee, where he unsuccessfully attempted to found a church. Following this, he moved back to California, where he worked at Knott’s Berry Farm, performing music, along with a variety of roping tricks with a lasso.

McEneary, who recorded with his band, the Swift Cowboys, on the Decca and Savoy record labels, was known for being a prolific songwriter. At one time, on a bet, he wrote both lyrics and music for fifty-two songs in an eight hour period, all while being handcuffed to a piano. Some of his more popular early songs were “Battle of the Alamo” and “Pony Express,” but he continued writing well into his later years, covering such topics as the Watergate scandal, the Ayatollah Khomeini, and Ronald Reagan. He wrote and recorded one song, “Shame is the Middle Name of Exxon,” after receiving a \$238 bill from one of the company’s service stations for what he believed to be completely unnecessary repairs on his car. When he performed the song in New York, Exxon’s company president heard it and sent McEneary a check for the entire amount of the bill. Other musicians also recorded McEneary’s songs, including Texas singer-songwriter Kinky Friedman, whose version of “Amelia Earhart’s Last Flight” always was a crowd pleaser.

McEneary returned to San Antonio in the early 1980s and devoted himself to painting. Two decades later, he was hospitalized with a kidney condition and died on January 15, 2002.

*Amanda Deen*