

## Foreward

Once in a lifetime someone comes along who doesn't fit any kind of mold. They are true self-starters who go against the grain and are relentless when the impossible needs to be done. One such person is a salt-water cowboy I've known for twenty-plus years named Arnie Deckwa.

You may have heard the song that says "I did it my way"—well, that song could have easily been written especially for this wrangler who has been my best friend for the better part of my musical career. Deckwa—that's what his friends call him—rode into Music City U.S.A. with a dream of making it big as a singer/songwriter, and after ten years left town with a much bigger dream that has become a national reality. He's a larger-than-life character who lives every minute of every day like it was his last.

I have worked with and around many recording artists and stars in my thirty years in the music industry, including Garth Brooks, Anne Murray, Trisha Yearwood, Isaac Hayes, Blake Shelton, Brad Paisley and many more. But I have never, I repeat never, met anyone who has the personality, drive and desire that this Whidbey Island entrepreneur cowboy possesses. *The Singin' Salmon Man from Cornet Bay* is a wonderful read that keeps you captivated every second with true stories that seem to parallel the lives of Mark Twain's Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer. It's an amazing and inspirational account of what someone can do when they won't let anything stand in the way of making their dream come true. For anyone who doesn't know what songs and salmon have in common, this book will truly be an eye-opener. It's great, it's entertaining, it's funny and most of all it's PURE DECKWA.

Tom Long, former membership director of ASCAP, VP of Anne Murray's publishing company, and president/owner, That-A-Fly Music, Nashville, TN.

In the late '80s, I was a head seafood clerk at the Kroger Bellevue Store near Nashville. One day a cowboy walked up to my counter and asked to speak to the seafood manager. I told him I was the manager and asked how I could help him. He replied with a big wide smile that he hoped he could help me. That was not a usual response, but I would soon learn there was nothing "usual" about this cowboy.

Of course the cowboy was Arnie Deckwa. He talked a few minutes about "hot smoked salmon" from the great Northwest. (Please understand that in the late '80s we had never heard of hot smoked salmon in Nashville, Tennessee.) I was late for a meeting with the store manager, so I thanked him, but explained I needed to end the conversation. He understood and was very polite. When I returned to the shop about an hour later, there was the cowboy still waiting patiently to continue our conversation.

I admired that kind of determination, so I decided to listen to him more. Eventually, we tried to sell hot smoked salmon in my shop. After this failed, Arnie told me about a smoked salmon dip he was making. We got all the ingredients and made it right there in my shop. We started sampling it. The response was phenomenal! We realized we finally had the right vehicle to sell Arnie's hot smoked salmon.

Those first few years were hard on Arnie, but his determination and inspiration carried him through. He never gave up, no matter what happened. Arnie found a silver lining in every defeat. Years later, I became the fresh seafood buyer for the Kroger company. One of the first things we did was develop Arnie's recipes into our private label Kroger brand seafood dips. Now, we sell several of Arnie's recipes every day at Kroger. Every time I see Kroger Smoked Salmon Dips in the seafood case, I think back to the time I first met him and how we mixed everything by hand. He is an inspiration to us all.

—David Long, Seafood Coordinator, The Kroger Company

Arnie is a true American original and I count it one of my great blessings to have met him when I first moved to Nashville as a “hungry songwriter.” Not only were there times when “Arn” literally showed up at my apartment door with a bag of groceries, but there were many other times when he nourished my soul with one inspiring, funny and heartwarming story after another. As I read the stories in this book, I caught myself bursting with laughter one second and trying to swallow a big lump in my throat the next. This book captures the spirit of a man who lives with as much passion, gusto and love for life as anyone I’ve ever met. I’m proud to call “Arn” my friend and I hope this book is the beginning of many more. — Allen Shamblin, writer of “He Walked On Water,” “Don’t Laugh At Me,” “I Can’t Make You Love Me,” and “The House That Built Me”

One day while I was working in the seafood shop at Kroger, I saw a strange man talking to my boss. Later, I was called over and introduced. “Glenda, this is Arnie. He is from Washington and he is promoting smoked salmon for our stores.” Now, this was a strange mix, I thought—a cowboy with a hat and boots, a country music singer, selling smoked salmon. We got the product in, but there was not a big market for it in the South, and so Arnie decided to make a dip out of it. This consisted of hand-chopping everything. Arnie would arrive at all hours, carrying his big green bowl. Feeling sorry for him, I would help him chop. After days of chopping, singing and getting acquainted, one night we had a brainstorm. Why not use our food chopper to chop the onions? Instant success! This cut down on time and manpower, and what a friendship we developed! I am extremely proud to say that Arnie’s seafood dips and spreads have been private labeled by Kroger and are being sold in Kroger stores nationwide; this country music-singing cowboy rode into Nashville on a salmon and became a lifelong friend. Thanks, Arnie, for including me in your success.

—Glenda McClurkan, former head seafood clerk, Green Hills Kroger, Nashville

Back in 1988, I was working at Kroger in Belle Meade, near Nashville, as seafood manager. One day Arnie showed up with a cowboy hat on, saying, “Hey, I’m here in Nashville riding in on my smoked salmon, trying to sell it at Kroger.” Back then we never had any kind of smoked salmon line to sell, so I decided to help him sell his. When Arnie came back to the store to see how it was going, I told him it wasn’t selling that great, so he decided to start making smoked salmon dip out of it. He would come back there in the shop with me, and we would take the salmon and skin it, debone it, cut it up, and mix in the other ingredients, putting it all into eight-ounce cups with lids. All the while, we’d be cutting up, singing, and having a good time. Along with his smoked salmon dip, Arnie came up with a Southern Style Crab Dip and a Cajun Style Smoked Salmon Dip, and we’d put out samples with crackers on top of the seafood case. He talked to customers, telling them about the dip, and it really started to sell great. Arnie eventually had to put together his own manufacturing facility to make it, and he’d ship it out to our stores. It doesn’t seem like it’s been twenty-three years since we were having all that fun. I really enjoyed those times with Arnie and I’m really glad that Kroger has their name on those dips. Ya did good, Cowboy.

—Tim Woodard, assistant meat manager, Belle Meade Kroger, Nashville

It seems like just yesterday that I first laid eyes on a character by the name of Arnie Deckwa—and he is a character, defined as “someone who has a certain quality or trait that distinguishes him as an individual.” I say that with respect and love for the man I grew to know. In the spring of 1987, I was employed in a large grocery store chain as head seafood clerk. I had completed my display set-up and

was policing the area, putting the finishing touches on the shine of the stainless steel display case when something told me to look up. Here came this cowboy, five-foot-six or so, slightly bow-legged, dressed in blue jeans and boots, a suitably western shirt and his ever-present grey-colored felt cowboy hat. He waltzed right up to the counter, looked me in the eyes, and with a big swift slap brought the palm of his hand to rest on the stainless steel counter top I had just polished. “Pardner,” he said, “I’ve got the best-tasting smoked salmon you ever did put in your mouth.”

Boy howdy, was I surprised! Never in all my born days did I expect that. I brought the palm of my hand down on the very same stainless steel display case with as much vigor and noise as he had and said, “Well, Pardner, then why don’t you bring me some so I can taste it, and then I’ll tell you if it’s the very best smoked salmon I ever did put in my mouth.” He did, it was, and a professional and personal relationship began at that moment. It is a friendship that is as strong as ever to this day. For ten years we worked together in and out of the field prior to his move back to his home in Washington State, establishing a business that is still thriving today. We have experienced many good times together, and I take pride in the fact that I played a very small role in his food business but shared a big role in his life. And even though today he lives over 2600 miles away, we remain Pals & Pardners Forever.  
—Buddy Hayes, former head seafood clerk, Brentwood, Tennessee, Kroger

## Introduction

### “THE FIRST AND ONLY COWBOY EVER TO RIDE INTO THE HISTORY OF NASHVILLE’S COUNTRY MUSIC ON SMOKED SALMON”

Hello, Pardner. I’m Arnie Deckwa. Chances are, since you’ve picked this book up, you’re familiar with one or more of my seafood dips, spreads, sauces and seasonings. My family and I produce them under our own Cornet Bay label and under the Kroger label, among others. They’re part of a line of products that was launched backstage at the Grand Ole Opry, believe it or not—and there are times when I can hardly believe it! It’s an amazing story, if I do say so myself. Actually, it’s a bunch of amazing stories from a life with more twists and turns than an eight-second bull ride.

Thank you

To my beautiful and wonderful wife Joanne:

There are not enough words, Hon, to express my feelings to you for your understanding of my being away so much in this last year and a half while writing this book. Whether it was simply up in the office until early morn, in the back room, or actually gone from our home, I was still away. Thank you for all your help and input and for being the rock that is so much needed in my life. You are a wonderful lady and I’m a very lucky guy.

All my love to you,  
Arnie

Chapter One  
AUNT GOLDIE AND MY BEGINNINGS

I came into this world on April 10, 1941, in a log house my great-aunt helped build. Goldie Wayman, a midwife by trade, chopped down and barked some of the trees herself at the age of fifty-one, living in a lean-to while working on the place with her husband and son-in-law after they'd moved to Whidbey Island, Washington, from California in 1934.

## Chapter Two

### THE LITTLE YELLOW HOUSE ON CORNET BAY

When I was born, my dad was logging in the high country of the northern Cascades, and shortly after that he began managing an apple orchard in Yakima. I was baptized in a Methodist church in nearby Selah and was still a baby when we moved back to Whidbey Island. I grew up three miles from Aunt Goldie's place, in a 494-square-foot yellow house on a dead-end road that skirted a beautiful body of water named Cornet Bay, which empties into Puget Sound.

## Chapter Three

### BUDDY AND ARNIE'S RAFTING ADVENTURE

Buddy Rodgers, who lived up the hill, was Huck Finn to my Tom Sawyer. We were as close as brothers, and we shared all sorts of adventures. Not a day went by that we didn't meet each other at the dock, on the beach, or at one of the hideaway forts we had built in a tree or in the hollow under a log. The fishermen were used to seeing us looking for red crabs under rocks or sitting on a log laughing as we planned a campout. They were also used to answering question after question about boats, fishing, and the sea from two kids with lots of energy and plenty of big dreams.

## Chapter Four

### THE WORLD'S SLOWEST JUMPING BOAT

The episode with the raft was one of those that came along every now and then to teach me something new about boats or water or my own abilities. I'd had one a couple of years earlier when I was seven or eight.

## Chapter Five

### THE SINGING COWBOY

I've done a lot of things, but the two I do now are the ones I've loved since I was old enough to hear the radio and pick up a fork at suppertime—music and food. Music was the dream that led me to Nashville, and food was the passion that turned into a great and exciting way of life.

## Chapter Six

### FROM STEM TO STERN BETWEEN THE TIDES

The romance and adventure of the sea—and there are plenty of both for a curious kid growing up in a fishing village—are quickly tempered by the fact that it's a life with plenty of hard work attached. I

helped Dad work on his boats from the time I was a little guy, and I couldn't begin to count the hours I spent on one chore or another while my buddies were headed toward the swimming hole in the nearby rock quarry.

## Chapter Seven FISHING WITH DAD

Dad and Uncle Bill Lang were the first two fishermen to lay a net out on the west side of Whidbey Island. They fished in an area we call West Beach, just outside Deception Pass, and people called them crazy for taking their small boats to the outside waters and risking some of the roughest seas anywhere.

What's more, in those early days, which were before my time, they didn't have hydraulic reels to pull the net in; they had to pull it in by hand.

## Chapter Eight THE BELL AND THE STORM

One night when I was ten or so, Dad and I were fishing the Charlotte D, a twenty-eight-foot gill net boat he had converted from a tug and named after my sister. It was a fairly clear night, and the water was as smooth as glass. We were sitting off the end of the Whidbey Island Naval Air Station runway on the west side of the island, near the lighted pylons that help guide the Navy jets in. The engine was shut off, and an eighteen-hundred-foot net was lying straight as a moonbeam through the water. Everything about the night was perfect. I was sitting in the pilothouse, feeling on top of the world. Dad was down below resting, and I was in charge, watching the net and keeping my eyes open for anything out of the ordinary.

## Chapter Nine THE ACCORDION AS A CAREER STARTER

When people ask me how far back my experience as a musician on the road or in the studio goes, I can honestly tell them I've been doing both since I was six. It's all because of a versatile instrument that doesn't get nearly the respect it deserves—the accordion. My friend Buddy and I were six when our mothers decided we needed to learn how to play one.

## Chapter Ten ROCKIN' IN THE BROOM CLOSET

As hard as it may be to believe, two of the places that put indelible stamps on my musical development were a boiler room and a broom closet. I should probably explain that. After several years of playing the accordion, I became interested in the guitar. My grandpa bought one and gave it to me, and I fooled with it every chance I got. The closest I got to lessons came from Hank Zeilstra, a school janitor I

called Uncle Hank. He played guitar in a band for years and was another tremendous influence on me.

#### Chapter Eleven

##### NATURE'S BOUNTY AS A WAY OF LIFE

If I'm going to talk about music, I need to talk about my other passion too—food. You know, for a family that didn't have any money to speak of, the Deckwas of Whidbey Island, Washington, had an awful lot of the bounty of nature on their table. Our freezer was usually filled with venison and elk from hunting trips I took with my dad starting when I was seven or eight; there was salmon, cod, crabs, clams, oysters, shrimp, and more from the sea; and we had vegetable gardens, apple and cherry trees, and a berry farm next door on my grandparents' place that brought us raspberries, blackberries, boysenberries, and loganberries. It makes my mouth water just thinking about it.

#### Chapter Twelve

##### HOW TO GET SICK OF DONUTS

When I was fifteen or so, my friend Willard Gaddis drove a bakery truck. He was a neat guy and I'd ride with him once in a while, enjoying the smells as much as our conversations. We got to talking about what I was going to do once fishing season ended in the fall, and he suggested I apply for a job at the bakery, which was in Oak Harbor. I could work nights and earn a little spending money until fishing season started again in the spring.

#### Chapter Thirteen

##### HITCHHIKING NEVADA: THE PINK STUCCO ADVENTURE

One of my bigger adventures—involving several cars, a bus, a shuttle, and a tractor-trailer rig that pulled mobile homes—led me all the way to Nevada in the summer of 1956. I was fifteen, and the dream of being a cowboy and working on a cattle ranch was so real I could taste it.

#### Chapter Fourteen

##### LIFE LESSONS FROM SOMEBODY WHO USED TO BE COOL

For a while in the mid-1950s, as James Dean and Elvis were just making their marks on the culture, I began turning myself into the epitome of the Whidbey Island hipster. I had my hair greased and combed back into a perfect ducktail, engineer boots polished and shining like a brand-new car, Levi's pulled down just a skosh for that perfect fit. Then, to set it all into motion, there was my leather jacket. Ah, yes, the jacket. That was the key to the whole deal. I'd stand at the mirror, grab the collar with my thumb and forefinger, and, slowly, with the look of someone who would never be afraid of anything, turn it up.

#### Chapter Fifteen

##### MY FIRST LESSON IN ATTITUDE

I should tell you that as much as I love my family and the heritage they passed on to me, there were a few years when I thought it was time for me to rise above them. It started as I began to develop “the

attitude.” I knew my cool quotient went down when I was at home, since my mom, dad, and grandparents were nowhere near as cool as the friends I was making in high school. That made the work I was doing for Grandpa Deckwa—a man who knew how to work you—that much harder.

#### Chapter Sixteen

#### ANOTHER ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

I seemed to be a slow learner in those days, because my experience with Grandpa Deckwa boxing my ears didn’t stop my bad attitude from surfacing again—this time with the other side of the family halfway across the state. I was sixteen, and I had it together. I would be spending the summer at Grandfather and Grandmother Sterkel’s place, driving to Kittitas, where they lived, in my white 1947 Pontiac, the first car I ever owned. I’d show this branch of the family, living on the outskirts of a town with just a few hundred people in it and working on a nearby farm, how a successful commercial fisherman from the coast could throw bales of hay with the best of them.

#### Chapter Seventeen

#### THE ACCIDENT: A HUGE LIFE LESSON

I’ve already told you how being cool led to some big life lessons, but the biggest and most powerful of those lessons involved automobiles. Back in 1958, when I was seventeen, I had this 1957 Chevy Bel Air sport coupe. It was a turquoise-colored, two-door hardtop, and it was just beautiful. It could also flat-out fly.

#### Chapter Eighteen

#### “YOU CAN’T BEAT US, DECKWA, SO YOU MIGHT AS WELL JOIN US”

When it came to the law—usually personified by Honsie—I was always touching base because of my driving habits. I was arrested more than once for speeding and once for reckless driving, losing my license and getting an occupational license that allowed me to drive just to work and back. My friends and I weren’t bad kids by today’s standards. There was nothing too malicious about what we did, and we were worlds away from things like drive-by shootings. Still, I always seemed to be in more of a hurry to go places than what the law thought prudent, at least judging by the speed limit signs posted in the area.

#### Chapter Nineteen

#### THE GROWN-UP COWBOY DREAM

Ever since I was a little boy, one of my biggest dreams was to be a cowboy. Mom and Dad helped it along, buying me two Roy Rogers cap pistols with a holster, leather wrist cuffs, and a cowboy hat, along with the classic Daisy Red Ryder BB gun. Then, of course, there was the saddle I rode on top of my dog Trigger’s house as I sang to the seagulls.

#### Chapter Twenty

#### MY FUN TIMES IN THE MILITARY

In 1960, my friend Bill Roberts told me he was going to join the National Guard and he asked if I'd think about joining too. That way we could go through the six months of active duty together. I looked into it and it seemed like the thing to do, so in January of 1961 I found myself on a train headed to Fort Ord, California.

#### Chapter Twenty-one

#### EDDY AND THE SPACE STATION

I was twenty years old when I bought my first house, the Grant Byhre place on Fort Nugent Road, about two miles west of Oak Harbor. More than once I spent the night in that house in the days when I was palling around with Dick Byhre. Dick's mom got a real kick out of me the first time I walked in because I told her that I liked the house and if she ever wanted to sell it, I'd like to buy it. Coming from the mouth of a fifteen-year-old, that statement really amused her, and we hit it off.

#### Chapter Twenty-two

#### POSSES AND CHARIOT RACES

Working with horses has given me a lot of satisfaction and more than my share of thrills over the years, and nothing packed more excitement than the annual collection of riding events known as the Washington State Sheriff's Posse Convention. It was a three-day horse and rider competition involving twenty or so posses, which were made up of volunteer assistants to county sheriff's departments. It was highly competitive—fierce would be a better word—and we just called it "The Meet." We were normal, forty-hour-a-week working guys who for those few days seemed to forget we had any responsibilities at all. Our Island County team always did really well, taking our share of first-place trophies in individual events and overall meets, but everybody gave it everything they had.

#### Chapter Twenty-three

#### ARNIE, RANDY, AND THE KILLER WHALE

My state trooper buddies included a guy named Randy Pepper. He was your normal trooper at the time—six feet four, 225 pounds. They all seemed to be that way. Randy was, in fact, a former Washington Huskies football player. Me, I'm five feet six and a half if I stretch, and I'm built kind of like a quarter horse, what my rodeo buddies call "pushed together and short to the ground." Our physical similarity ended with our badges. What we did have in common was that we were great hunting and fishing partners, and excitement never seemed too far from either of us. When we got together, that went double, although nothing we'd ever been through could have prepared us for what happened one beautiful summer afternoon in the early 1960s.

#### Chapter Twenty-four

#### A VETERINARIAN'S NIGHT OUT ON THE WATER

Back in those days, there were memorable friends on the cowboy side of my life too. There wasn't much, for instance, that my friend Kent Freer wouldn't tackle, and somehow he was able to get me involved in quite a bit of it. A cowboy-turned-veterinarian, Kent left his home in Wyoming to live on Whidbey Island, picking up a whole new outlook



on life in the process. I drove countless miles with Kent in his pickup truck, assisting him now and then in operations and foalings, although there were a few situations I wish I'd never been talked into.

#### Chapter Twenty-five

#### THE ALBERTA MOOSE HUNT

Although hunting has put a great deal of food in the freezer and on the table throughout my life, there is much more to it than that. Hunting gave me a special connection with my father and grandfather, the way it has connected fathers and sons, brothers and uncles, grandparents and friends for millennia. Hunting let me renew ties with my buds, some of whom I only saw once a year or so, as we'd sit around a campfire telling stories, reliving old adventures and plotting new ones. I've hunted with more people than I could count, beginning when I was big enough to hold a rifle. Two of the most memorable, other than my dad, are my Uncle Ralph and Arnie Freund, both of whom have been kicking me in the fanny since I was knee-high to a grasshopper. Both of them are real characters and as I write this, Uncle Ralph is 87 and Arnie, who was our sheriff, is 92.

#### Chapter Twenty-six

#### HUNTING THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN GOAT WITH A BOW

It's one thing to hunt with rifles. It's quite another to use a bow and arrow. I knew when I got into bowhunting that I'd have to take it very, very seriously. I bought a recurve bow from Herter's, the great outdoor catalog, and I made my own arrows and even a few bowstrings. I was going to need plenty of practice before I'd ever consider going on a hunt, so I set up targets in the back yard. Every night after work I'd shoot at least sixty shafts. Then I set up a real challenge. The kids had a tire hanging from a rope over the sandbox, and I put a target behind it. I'd start the tire spinning slowly and I'd back up and try to shoot an arrow through the hole and into a balloon on the target.

#### Chapter Twenty-seven

#### RANDY, ARNIE AND A WORLD-CLASS GOAT

As disappointed as I was by that unsuccessful hunt, I knew I had a little more time left on the permit, so I decided to go back and try it once more. My buddy Randy Pepper agreed to go with me back to the same area.

#### Chapter Twenty-eight

#### ONE FOR THE GIPPER

I was always an active guy, so it was never hard convincing me to take on a physical challenge. A few years after high school, my friend Bernie Lange talked me and a bunch of other guys into a memorable one. I had known Bernie's family all my life—in fact, I was working for his dad when I was seventeen and bought the '57 Chevy I loved so much. Bernie was a class act. He also had what they call "game." He pulled together a bunch of us has-been athletes for a Junior Chamber of Commerce game against a semi-pro football team called the Cavaliers.

## Chapter Twenty-nine

### MUSIC: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE MARRIED

Playing music professionally is kind of like sandpaper—there's a smooth side and a rough side, and through the years I've experienced my share of both. On the rough side, first is just getting it together. Finding, auditioning, and rehearsing musicians, keeping the good ones happy, letting the bad ones go, and keeping everybody straight and motivated all present challenges. You might get an idea of just how challenging it can be when I tell you I've worked with more than a hundred different people in bands over the years. There were guys with attitude problems, drinking problems, the inability to show up at rehearsals or gigs on time, and a whole host of other maladies. Sometimes it took patience and determination just to keep things together from one gig to the next.

## Chapter Thirty

### BULLDOZER BLUES

There are two ways to approach a marital break-up like that. You can get mad and do something terrible and end up in jail—which plenty of people have done—or you can get some rest, regroup, and make plans to rise above it. That's

what I decided to do. BULLDOZER BLUES I've been on the road workin' all the time Tryin' to make a dollar so I could end up with a dime, When I came home to see my little wife, She handed me some papers and they cut me like a knife. She said I'll take the house, you can have the bills, My mind was overcome with some liberated thrills, I'll get a permit, and a D9 Cat And I'll open up the throttle and smash the house flat. Chorus: The bulldozer blues, the bulldozer blues, I'll end up in trouble but I'm doin' what I choose, Do what you feel is right, you'll either win or lose, But you'll never have to live with the bulldozer blues.

## Chapter Thirty-one

### REGROUPING

For a while after the divorce, things were tough for me financially. I didn't panic, but I knew I had to get my head clear, so I put in a call to Charlie Boone, a friend in Arizona, and asked if I could come down and visit. He said, "Sure," and I got things squared away. My airline ticket and expenses were coming out of the last \$500 I had, but I knew this trip was just what I needed to keep from going loco. I decided to stay for a week.

## Chapter Thirty-two

### CHRIST AND CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIES

It was somewhere during this stretch of time that I got my act together as a Christian. I had drifted away from regular church attendance as a boy, although I always believed in God and in Christ as the pathway to the Father. There were people who'd planted seeds in my heart along the way. One, of course, was

my mother, whose faith was always strong and whose influence was always profound. She and my father said more with the way they lived than they ever could with words.

### Chapter Thirty-three GETTING MY ACT TOGETHER

As a single dad spending more and more time and energy on music, I was in a great position to get things rolling. The people around me knew I was poised to move it all up a notch as well, and they approached me with an idea. In 1985, some friends and I talked about forming a small corporation to put a little financial muscle behind my music. These were people who had been behind me as my reputation grew regionally, and they wanted to be part of an effort to go national. A local attorney thought it was a great idea, and he dotted the i's and crossed the t's. We talked it all out, and I made it clear this should be money they could afford to lose—it was all a big roll of the dice. Still, no one was more sincere about making it work than I was.

### Chapter Thirty-four OFF TO NASHVILLE

In January 1987 I hooked a trailer to my refurbished '73 Dodge van, filled both with clothes and musical equipment, and headed for Nashville. My goal was to try to make it in country and country/gospel music. It felt like my entire life had led up to that trip. All those dreams, all those days marching with my accordion, all the bands, all the triumphs and heartaches were rolled up into this journey down 2,600 miles of life's highway. I was one excited cowboy.

### Chapter Thirty-five MY COOKING SCHOOL

All my life I've enjoyed good food. It's true whether I'm eating someone else's cooking or my own. Since Nashville is where my cooking career got its start, it's time I talk about how I learned to cook in the first place. It started aboard my dad's fishing boat when I was about eight years old.

### Chapter Thirty-six “YOU NEED TO DO SOMETHING WITH THIS!”

Because I was hanging out with Dennis McCall of the Carol Lee Singers, I got to spend time backstage at the Grand Ole Opry—in fact, I'd practically live back there for the next ten years, although I wouldn't have dreamed that at the time.

### Chapter Thirty-seven “HEY, COWBOY, YOU WANNA DANCE?”

Talking backstage with legends is wonderful, but of course you don't put any money in the bank that way, so I started going out and doing shows. I pulled musicians together from among my new friends at the Opry and worked up a show that

combined music with a message about not using drugs and alcohol, aimed at kids in grade school, junior high, and high school. I'd seen enough damage from drug and alcohol abuse as a sheriff's deputy—and I knew too much from my own experience, including that awful car wreck—that I felt it was the perfect way to put even more passion on stage when I went out to sing. I'd be making something positive out of the tragedies I'd witnessed.

#### Chapter Thirty-eight THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

I took Brent Burkett's advice and started getting smoked salmon into a few Kroger stores. I brought it in from back home, and since I couldn't smoke two hundred pounds of salmon myself in Nashville, I used a commercial smoked salmon company that shipped it to me. I got started in the Kroger store in Brentwood, a suburb south of Nashville, and eventually seven seafood clerks brought me in to seven Kroger stores. They were Buddy Hayes in Brentwood, Glenda McClurkan in Green Hills, Tim Woodard in Belle Meade, David Long in Bellevue, Paul Long in Goodlettsville, Natalie Birdsong in Gallatin, and Buddy Perrin at Williamson Square in Franklin. I started calling them the Magnificent Seven, and I still think of them that way.

#### Chapter Thirty-nine "YOU MUST BE STRIPPED! STRIPPED!"

Back when I was doing those shows and getting started at Kroger, I was spending a lot of time with Allen Shamblin, another struggling songwriter who lived at the Warren House Apartments. He had an efficiency down at the other end of the apartment building. We were both trying to write songs and do whatever it took to pay the bills. He was a big inspiration—a guy with a degree in marketing who was out chasing his dream. He was parking cars in a hospital parking lot at the time. I'd sit in his apartment and tell him about my day peddling songs, doing those grade school and high school shows, or making and selling dips, barely scraping by. He'd tell me about doing different things to get songs heard. Then we'd write a gospel song together.

#### Chapter Forty MOVING UP

The encouragement I'd gotten from David at the Bellevue Kroger and a few others had kept me going, but I still needed a break. Finally, someone at Kroger decided the company was going to carry my dips on a larger scale. The seafood buyer called my apartment. "Arnie," he said, "we're gonna put your dips in the stores and in the warehouse. I want you to make an appointment with me and come up to our headquarters and show this product."

#### Chapter Forty-one WADING THE PINEY RIVER

Visiting Buddy Hayes's store in Brentwood was always a treat, and most of the time I would try to plan a visit when we could go to lunch, where we'd talk about our families and, of course, the food business. Buddy was a good listener and a great talker—it was always fun to hear the way he'd tell a story with that laid-back Tennessee accent of his.

One day Bud decided he and I needed a break. “Arn,” he said, “you and I need to fish the Piney River. It’s close to where you live, and once you get geared up and we leave, we can be there in an hour.” “What are we fishin’ for?” I asked. “Oh,” he said, “nothin’ big like you’re used to in your part of the country. This is Tennessee style. We’ll catch some little ol’ sunfish and maybe a bass or two. Who knows? The main thing is just to wade the Piney. You’ll like it.”

#### Chapter Forty-two LOVE HAPPENS

At a time when the thought of going back home was still coming to mind now and then, I met the woman who would complete me and make me a happily married man. Of course, I didn’t know that at the time. When I met Joanne, I had around \$6.50 in cash to my name. You can find out pretty quickly whether someone likes you for who you are when that’s the kind of bankroll you’ve got. She made a big impression on me, and it probably helped that I met her at church. My faith was key to my life at this point and I was particular about the church I wanted. I visited eleven before I found one that felt like home—Grassland Baptist Church—and that’s where I met Joanne.

#### Chapter Forty-three “YOU GET A LINE, I’LL GET A POLE”

Success in most anything involves a series of connections between people. One day my songwriting friend and supporter Allen Shamblin said, “You need to go to ASCAP and see Tom Long.” ASCAP is the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers, an organization that collects royalties for songwriters and publishers. Tom worked there at the time, and he was one of the friendliest and most knowledgeable guys on the Row. He quickly became a close friend, somebody who helped me make connections and helped me stay sane at the same time. Whenever he was part of a Music Row event, it seemed like he’d find a way to include me.

#### Chapter Forty-four ARNIE’S SMOKIN’ SALMONS

We added another store, and then another, and pretty soon we were in twelve, then seventeen, then twenty. Now we had printed labels on the containers with a caricature of me, combining the cowboy and salmon elements. The exposure on Music Row was increasing, since whenever there was a #1 party or gold album party at ASCAP, Tom Long would make sure I was there with the dips. I met a lot more people in the music business that way, and word about the dips continued to spread.

#### Chapter Forty-five “THE FIRST AND ONLY COWBOY...”

There is more than one way to grow a business, and as we expanded the number of stores we were in, we began to think about expanding our product line as well. I got the idea for a Cajun-style smoked salmon dip, which would involve spicing the original recipe just the right way. I tried various combinations, but the spices I was using at first just weren’t working well for me. Now, if I’d have been

a huge start-up business, I'd have hired somebody with expertise in spices and tapped into that knowledge. But this was a shoestring operation, and I had to become an expert the only way I knew how—trial and error.

#### Chapter Forty-six

#### COWBOYS DON'T BELONG IN CONDOS

When Joanne and I got married, I moved into her condo on Boxwood Drive in Franklin, Tennessee. Now, you wouldn't think moving into a condo would kick off a whole new series of adventures, but by now you know that no matter what the circumstances, this cowboy's life is never dull. It didn't take long for things to get interesting.

#### Chapter Forty-seven

#### DRIVING THROUGH AMERICA IN YESTERDAY, LOOKING AT TODAY

It was great to have something to show for my Condo Range experience, but now that Cowboys Don't Belong in Condos was out, I knew it needed a little push. I decided to combine a trip home to Cornet Bay with a promotional tour. I'd be driving my 1954 half-ton Chevy pickup, a 100 percent stock vehicle with a little rust and plenty of heart. I got it checked over to make sure it could handle a three-thousand-mile jaunt, and it came through with flying colors. I did install electric windshield wipers, since I knew the old vacuum wipers that stopped when you gave the rig some gas weren't going to be much good in a snow storm.

#### Chapter Forty-eight

#### MAKING IT

I know from experience how important the help, support, and friendship of good people are to achieving goals, but I also know that everything starts with a dream. I had mine long before I got to Nashville, and I know that few people feel theirs as strongly as I felt mine.

#### Chapter Forty-nine

#### PRICELESS MEMORIES FROM A LITTLE YELLOW HOUSE

The little yellow house I grew up in is still standing on this dead-end road named Cornet Bay. The music business and the food business may have taken me a lot of places, including homes big enough that families actually get lost in them, but I've come to realize that the experiences and lessons I carried away from that tiny house are priceless. I wouldn't trade a thing.

#### Chapter Fifty

#### THE CORNET BAY COMPANY

Now and then people ask me about my business plan. I just look at them and say, "I got an idea and went to work on it one day over twenty years ago. Then I showed up the next day and the day after that and just kept going. I got more ideas along the way, and when one didn't work, I thought up another and another until I found one that did. And I just kept showing up."

## Chapter Fifty-one RUNNING THE BUSINESS HANDS ON

The Cornet Bay Company has always been a hands-on, one-on-one kind of company, whether we're talking supermarket executives or tasteconscious shoppers. That approach led us to revamp our approach to travel a few years back. After years of commercial flights and rental cars, motels and restaurants, it became clear we needed a motor home. That would also let us keep samples on hand and keep my fly rod case from warping in the hot sun under the back window of the car!

## Chapter Fifty-two LIFE, FOOD, AND PEOPLE

I talked earlier in the book about Cornet Bay itself, and I'd like to do so again as our time together comes to a close. It's where my parents and grandparents lived. It's where I was raised and where Joanne and I now live. It will always be home. I love the fact that our office is in the little house I was raised in. I can walk out on the porch and almost see myself and my friends as youngsters being raised like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. I can gaze out at the waters that gave us our livelihood and picture myself as a fourteen-year-old running a commercial fishing boat. I can look back on the love and guidance of my parents, who were my best friends and who supported me as I set out into the world, ready to make a go of it.

## Cornet Bay RECIPES