

## **My Life Story**



**Thongprasert Trithara, Story Teller**



**Idell Lewis , Story Keeper**

## Acknowledgement

As we near the consummation of the Ethnic Life Stories Project, there is a flood of memories going back to the concept of the endeavor. The awareness was there that the project would lead to golden treasures. But I never imagined the treasures would overflow the storehouse. With every Story Teller, every Story Keeper, every visionary, every contributor, every reader, the influence and impact of the project has multiplied in riches. The growth continues to spill onward. As its outreach progresses, "boundaries" will continue to move forward into the lives of countless witnesses.

Very few of us are "Native Americans." People from around the world, who came seeking freedom and a new life for themselves and their families, have built up our country and communities. We are all individuals, the product of both our genetic makeup and our environment. We are indeed a nation of diversity.

Many of us are far removed from our ancestors who left behind the familiar to learn a new language, new customs, new political and social relationships. We take our status as Americans for granted. We sometimes forget to welcome the newcomer. We bypass the opportunity to ask about their origins and their own journey of courage.

But, wouldn't it be sad if we all spoke the same language, ate the same food, and there was no cultural diversity.

This project has left me with a tremendous debt of gratitude for so many. The almost overwhelming task the Story Keeper has, and the many hours of work and frustration to bring forth a story to be printed. I salute you.

To the Story Tellers, thank you for letting us share in your heart and soul. It is my prayer that some or many of the stories will influence many young persons to another level, to be enmeshed in the pursuit of learning of other cultures that make up our community and the world.

This has, indeed, been a project of "Many" for the Community. Thanks to the following who have played a role in helping to achieve the goal. The list is practically endless, first names only. You know who you are and what you did . . . sincere thanks to each of you:

Caroline, Charity, Charlotte, Bob, Dana, De Ann, Ed, Eric, Erman, Jim, Joha Oke, John K, John M, June, Kay, Kendall, Maria, Mark, Michelle, Myra, Norma, Pat, Rachel, Rob, Starr, Susan, Valerie, and special recognition to Jim Coombs, SMSU, Map Department.

Jim Mauldin  
Coordinator  
Ethnic Life Stories  
'01 '02 '03

**The Ethnic Life Stories Project....**

*...giving the Springfield community a window to its diversity through the life stories of ethnic elders.*

Liewe Se Storie Afrikaanse	Afrikaanse (2)
ŌSŌ GAY HĀY WŌ TAN	Apache
قصص من الحياة	Arabic (2)
Ga-no-du Ka-ne-he-lv-s-gi	Cherokee
自傳	Chinese (2)
Life Stories	English (5)
Histoires De Ma Vie	French (2)
Lebensgeschichten	German
סיפור חיים	Hebrew
Mayer rah-Khaan Knee-Hindi	Hindi
生きてきた道	Japanese
나의 살아온 이야기	Korean
DZĪVES STĀSTS	Latvian
ജീവിത കഥകൾ	Malayalam
OPOWIESC z ŻYCIA	Polish
Imanawangtanan Wawanaycasjas	Quechwa
Povestea Vie Ţii Mele	Romanian
Жизненные истории	Russian
Historia De La Vida	Spanish (8)
പുഴയ്ക്കി ചിന്ത	Thai
Kuwento Ng Aking Buhay	Tagalog
CHUY-N [◎] Tjĭ	Vietnamese
געשיחטע פון מאיזן לעבען	Yiddish

# Birthplaces of the Storytellers

2001 2002 2003

Yohannan Abraham  
Pathanamthitta, Kerala, India

Janet Akaike - Toste  
Kofu, Japan

Tony Albuquerque  
Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

Martha Baker  
San Antonio, Texas

Grace Ballenger  
Shanghai, China

Ruth L.V. Burgess  
Poona (Pune), India

Sara Fajardo Calderon  
Guatemala City, Guatemala

Olga Codutti  
Rosario, Santa Fe, Argentina

Claudine Arend Cox  
Boulay, France

Adalyn Cravens  
Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

Taj Farouki  
Wadi-Hunayn, Palestine

Malca Flasterstein  
Holon, Israel

Edgar Galinanes  
Mayaguez, Puerto Rico

Reynaldo Gumucio  
Cochabamba, Bolivia

John Hernandez  
San Antonio, Texas

Yung Hwang  
Okjong, Kyungnam, Korea

Madge (Jackie) King  
London, England

Edward P. Ksara  
Tangier, Morocco

Hyman Lotven  
Kapulah, Russia

Regina Lotven  
Nancy, France

Sterling Macer  
Mason City, Iowa

Gwendolyn Marshall  
Jackson, Mississippi

Maria Michalczyk-Lillich  
Sandomierz, Poland

Edith F.L. Middleton  
Glasgow, Scotland

Loan Vu Nigh  
Thai Binh, Vietnam

Jorge Padron  
Pedro Betancourt-Matanza, Cuba

Ruth Penaherrera-Norton  
Archidona, Ecuador

Eric Pervunkhin  
Moscow, Russia

Ioana Popescu  
Bucharest, Romania

Josefina S. Raborar  
Manila, Philippines

Juan Salazar  
Tuman, Peru

Eligio Sanchez  
Mexico City, Mexico

Tong Trithara  
Audmaya, Thailand

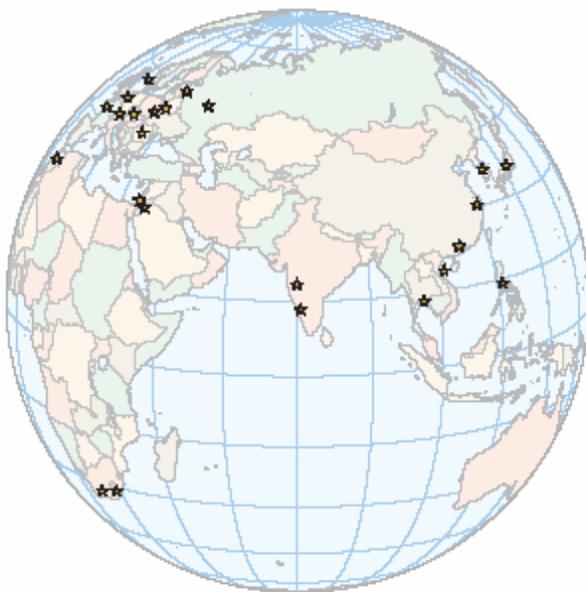
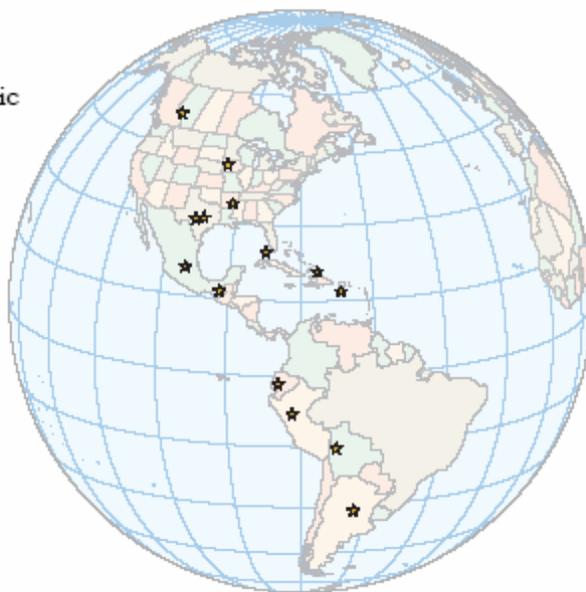
Cyril Vermooten  
Beaufort West, South Africa

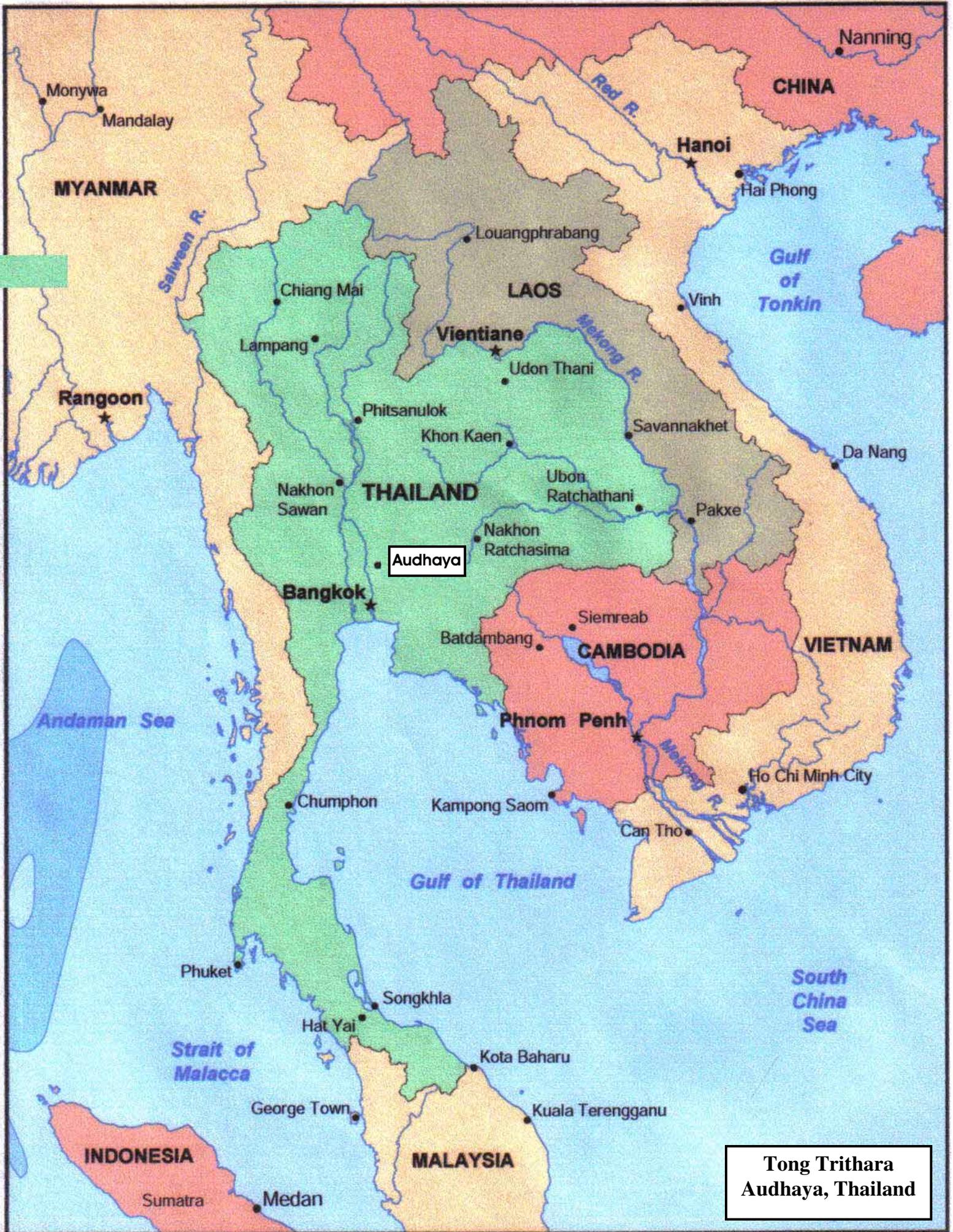
Joy Vermooten  
Nqaberie (Natal), South Africa

Ilga Vise  
Riga, Latvia

Hiltrud M. Webber  
Domnau, Germany

Tobby Yen  
Chung (Zhongshan), China





Tong Trithara  
Audhaya, Thailand

## **INTRODUCTION**

Thongprasert is colorful and entrepreneurial. He has many talents, including kickboxing in which he is a nationally recognized teacher and trainer. He is also a gourmet chef and restaurateur. He has traveled a great deal and has combated adversity in imaginative ways. His generosity and life philosophy continue to lead him to help people wherever he can. It has been fun and fascinating to hear his story.

Idell Lewis  
November, 2003

## **DEDICATION**

To all my family and friends

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## CHAPTER ONE: FAMILY HISTORY

My full name is Thongprasert Trithara (Tong-pra'-sert Tri-ta'-ra) but most people call me Tong. In my mother's family it is traditional that everyone use Thong as a first name. In Thai, "Thong" means golden and "Prasert" means higher up. In our family our maternal grandmother named all of the children.

My paternal grandfather emigrated from Vietnam to Thailand in the early 1800's. He moved to a village called Audhaya where there were a lot of people of Vietnamese descent. He chose Trithara as his surname because of the location of the land in which he chose to settle. "Tri" means three and "thara" means river. There are three main rivers that flow through the country; the biggest one is the Chao Praya. In Thailand, all transportation was by boat. Either a long boat or a paddleboat was used to traverse the waterways. Most people made a living in farming, mainly rice, but also pigs, chicken, or vegetables. Many other people fished for a living.



*Me, my father, and youngest sister,  
Aarcharat.*

distributor. When I was a little older both of my parents ran a restaurant that was located next to the Treasury. My father cooked Vietnamese food and my mother cooked Thai food.

My mother's name was Thongkum Tippayosoht, and she and her family were all natives of Thailand. She also was about 5' 4" tall and pretty with long black hair. A lot of my relatives on my mother's side were very talented and good-looking. In fact, two of my uncles and an aunt were famous state actors. They would travel around the country performing on an outdoor stage wherever there was a temple festival or a New Year's celebration. The costumes were beautiful and very colorful. I was often asked by my grandmother to be an extra in these plays. They paid me with candy money, but I didn't enjoy it very much. My

My family is Catholic since my grandfather emigrated from Vietnam, which is a Catholic country because of the French influence.

My father's name was Prasert Trithara. He was about 5' 4" tall, well built and strong. He was a hard worker and a very active person, always busy doing something. He was also very intelligent and could do just about anything. When I was born he owned a boat factory and also worked as a whiskey



*My mother in her 20's*

mother did a lot of classical singing and dancing, although not much after I was born. Later she worked as a kindergarten teacher. She was a calm and gentle lady who enjoyed cooking.

I was born March 27, 1952, in Ban Pan Province, Thailand, which is located about 50 miles from Bangkok. My uncle who lived a couple of villages away from us delivered me. He worked as a village doctor, having learned the trade from his father, my maternal grandfather, who passed away before I was born. He delivered all of the children in my family except for my youngest sister who was born in a hospital in Bangkok. He was often paid for his services with food and by using the barter system if his patients didn't have money to give to him.

I have three brothers and three sisters. The oldest, my brother Dalernsak Trithara, works in the Union Bank in Los Angeles, California. My next brother, Sanit Trithara, works for Thai Oil Company in Si Racha, Thailand. My third brother, Seri Trithara, died three and a half years ago in Los Angeles of cancer. Pattira Trithara, my oldest sister, was a marketing director for Foremost in Thailand and a buyer for AT & T. She now owns her own beauty supply business in Nonthaburi, Thailand. I am fifth in line. My younger sister, Sudarat Trithara, is employed in title search in Los Angeles. My youngest sister, Aarchara Wannasirikul, lives in Bangkok. Her husband owns a printing and publishing company that employs 300 people.



*My Grandmother*

Of all the people in my family, I admire my three sisters the most. They are all strong willed and successful women. This wouldn't have been possible in the old days when women weren't allowed to work outside the home. Although in some countries boys are more welcome than girls, in Thailand this is not the case. Thai people love their sons and daughters equally, as I love my son and daughter equally.

One night when I was three months old, a man came in a boat to kill my whole family. I don't know the whole story, but my mother's right arm was cut with a big fighting sword when she tried to protect me from the fighting. My father was knocked onto the floor, and they thought he was dead. Both had to stay in the hospital for a long time. Since my grandmother also lived in our village, she came by boat to get me. Her name was Pue Titpayosod. She was seventy years old at the time. My brothers went to a Catholic boarding school, my sisters stayed with my parents after they got out of the hospital, and I went to stay with my grandmother. I identify with her the most. She is the one who told me this story. I did eventually find out who the guy was, but not why he did it. He is buried in the same cemetery as my grandfather.

From that day when I was three months old until I was about seven, I traveled with my grandmother. She had nine children, and some of her sons had two or three wives and they

all had children, so we went from one to the other staying with them. She was always asked who I was, and she would tell them that I was the child of her youngest daughter who almost got killed. We had a big family, so it was hard to keep all of the grandchildren and great grandchildren straight. Since most people didn't have rooms in their houses they shared one big room. My grandmother and I would share a net to sleep under. This was to keep the mosquitoes off us. We slept on the floor on grass mats and kept our clothes in a bag in the corner. People with money had furniture, but since my grandmother and I were only staying for a little while, we just carried our stuff in a bag.

I have many fond memories of my childhood, but one of my favorites is the boats that would come up the river selling vegetables, pork, noodles, and dessert, for those who didn't want to cook. They had a little horn that was tooted to catch your attention. The longtailed boats had an engine in the back to guide it and some of the boats had paddles. Most of the houses were built on stilts on the banks of the river. This was to keep rising river waters from flooding the homes. To get around to the other houses a small boat was used, but if you were traveling to another village or province, a motor boat was used.

Another good memory is fishing on the river. Everyone would keep a net, baskets, and bamboo in front of their house to be ready whenever a big boat came by. We would drop a net down in the water and wait for the waves from the boat to push the fish in our direction and then used the bamboo like a yo-yo to pull the nets back up. Then we would empty the fish into a basket. Some people would sell their catch, but we used ours for food.

One of the things I miss from my childhood is seeing the water buffalo. When I was a child they were used to plow the rice fields. I used to sit on their neck and ride them. They liked to stay in the water or the mud to stay cool. No one else in my family had this experience, so I feel very lucky. Today the water buffalo have been replaced with modern machinery so you don't see them much anymore. I miss the environment of the boats and seeing the people paddling around all day long.

Audhaya, my hometown, is the old capital city of Siam. The land is flat with lots of water. It used to be a farming community, but today it's mainly industrial and manufacturing although they have tried not to put too many factories in the area. When I go to see my aunt and uncle on my father's side I still see some rice farms, but Audhaya used to be the number one rice producing area in the country and in the world.



*Longtailed Boats*

My grandmother was a Buddhist so while I stayed with her I went to the temple and chanted with her. When

I went back to live with my family at the age of about seven, I went to the Catholic Church with them. I prefer Catholicism, but Buddhism teaches you to be humble, calm, and relaxed.

It is a tradition in Thailand for the men to become a monk to honor their parents or grandparents. You can make a commitment of seven days, one month, ninety days, or one year, depending on how long you want to sacrifice your life. Sometimes I wish I had done this. I offered to do this to repay my grandmother and to give her honor. She refused me because I was Catholic. Most Thai parents like to see their sons become a monk if only for a few days. The only catch is you can only eat two meals a day, and some can't do that.

## CHAPTER TWO: EARLIEST MEMORIES

My nickname is “Moo” which means little pig. My guess is I must have been a chubby little kid. I was told that when I was a kid I could make my mouth look like a pig’s snout. I still can. Thai people have two names and a nickname, and the nickname can be an animal, tree, or thing. Thai people don’t have middle names.

Back in my day there were no vacuum cleaners. Wood floors were washed with a rag on hands and knees. There was plumbing in town, but not where I lived. Everyone kept a big jar of water at the front of their house to wash feet and a little bowl to wash hands before coming in. This water was carried up in containers from the river. Most people kept a pumice stone in the water to wash with. It was very dusty and muddy. Rain was collected in different containers for drinking. During the rainy season we would catch and store as much as we could to use during the dry season. Today there is pollution and that can’t be done anymore.

I didn’t have chores to do when I stayed with my grandmother. She and her children and grandchildren did all of the cooking and cleaning, although sometimes I would help. We entertained ourselves by running around the rice fields, catching fish, and taking the water buffalo for a bath. I also went with my grandmother to the Buddhist temple every day.

Our diet consisted mainly of rice, curry, and salad. We also ate a lot of fish, pork, and chicken. Back then when you wanted chicken you just went out and wrung its neck. My father’s family had a chicken, duck, and pig farm. When they came they would bring food to the house. My father would cook Vietnamese food for us that was really good. Some of my grandmother’s family were also rice farmers, besides those who were actors. Most Thai people drink tea and coffee, which is pretty strong, like espresso, and they put in a lot of sugar. We also had Pepsi, Coca-Cola, and Fanta in orange or green. Fanta was really popular back then.

Every morning in Thailand at about five or six, monks wearing yellow robes would begin making their rounds to gather food. Since the monks can’t cook their own food and are allowed only two meals a day, they had to be offered food. They would walk from door to door or visit the houses using a small paddleboat and the people would have food wrapped and ready to be eaten. They would put the food in buckets that they carried with them, and some would have children with them to help carry it. The children were orphans that the monks took in to raise. After the food was collected the monks would eat about eleven.

When I went back to live with my parents in Bangkok I slept with them under a big mosquito net. I washed my clothes by hand, and to cook we used a charcoal fire. To start the fire I used a fire starter with shredded wood. When the fire was going I would put on the charcoal.

As a kid I used to sell toffee that my mom made, and sometimes I sold ice cream to people at their homes. I had a cooler for the ice cream that I put in a bamboo holder with a handle that I slung over my shoulder to carry the ice cream. I walked around and rang a bell to tell people that I had ice cream to sell. I bought the ice cream from a wholesaler. Any coin less than a baht in Thailand is called a satang. Today 42 bahts equal \$1.00 in American money. I used my money to buy necessities, mainly clothes. We didn't wear jeans as Thailand is a very hot country. We usually wore shorts, or if we were going out we wore slacks. Jeans weren't popular then as they are today. Now everybody wears jeans.

When I was a teenager my father bought a bigger house and I got a room of my own. My sisters had stayed with my parents and my brothers went to a Catholic boarding school to train to become priests until they were high school age. Because I had been taken to stay with my grandmother and my brothers were away, we didn't have much of a childhood together, but I love them all very much.

### *Early Schools*

I went to a Catholic school at the age of six or seven. It had grades through 12, like here in America. At this first school I walked to and from school, which was about a mile. We had lunch there but sometimes my mom would pack our lunches. We started learning English in kindergarten.



*In my Boy Scout uniform,  
age 14*

The next school I went to was also a Catholic school. It was called St. John's and was started by a man who lived next door to us. His name was Samai Chinapa and he had been given a scholarship to go to England. When he returned he started this small school and asked my mom to be a kindergarten teacher there, so we followed her to the new school. Today this school has grown to become one of the largest in the country. It was very expensive to go there, but he honored my mother by letting her kids go for free. We initially moved closer to this school but later moved far away and had to take the bus, not a school bus but a regular one. My dad bought a beat-up car later, but we usually took the bus. The school had about 3,000 students and we all had to wear a blue and white uniform that had the school initial and our student ID number on the left chest. I still remember my number, it was 2,506.

I received a lot of honors in school for being one of the top Boy Scouts. At fourteen, I was picked to be a drug enforcement scout and was trained by the police. We worked together to keep drugs from kids at school. I also was trained as a traffic scout. They taught me hand

and arm signals to direct traffic in front of the school before and after classes. As a scout I had the opportunity to meet the King of Thailand twice. This is not an easy thing to do and is a great honor. I was being honored for my training with the DEA as a narcotics agent.

I attended a vocational school later to learn electronics. One of the priests there who taught English was my favorite teacher. I never had any trouble with my teachers, they all seemed to like me. I was a well-liked kid and made friends easily.

### *Special Occasions*

Catholic weddings were just as they are here, but a Thai wedding was different. A dowry was needed in most families. The prospective groom would go to the girl's parents for permission to marry and the parents would set the dowry. If the dowry was too high you would know that they didn't want you to marry their daughter. My brother Dalernsak got married that way. Since we are Catholic there were two weddings, one at the Catholic church and one a traditional Thai wedding. Neither my brother nor my father had the dowry but his bride-to-be did, so she gave it to my parents. For the Catholic wedding the bride wore the traditional white dress. For the Thai wedding they wore different clothes and followed the tradition of tying the couples' hands together with a rope and pouring water over them. This was for good luck. The guests brought envelopes with cash for the new couple. Sanit and all three of my sisters went through this in Thailand. Seri got married in a Catholic ceremony in California.

I have never been to any of my family's weddings. When Seri was married in the United States, I was in Thailand. When I came here both Dalernsak and Sanit got married in Thailand and I didn't have the money to go back. Two of my sisters were also married in Thailand while I was here. My youngest sister met her husband in Los Angeles and they went back to Thailand to get married.

When I went to a religious holiday in Thailand, like Christmas, I went to a Catholic church. There was a Christmas tree at the church but we never had one at our house. We didn't exchange presents in Thailand. The church tree was decorated with big stars. We were given a little bamboo stick to knock a star off the tree and when you peeled off the underneath part there was a number on it that told you what gift you got. The gifts were little items, like candy. We would go to midnight mass where there was a play telling the story of Mother Mary and of the birth of Jesus and when Jesus went to heaven.

Holidays were much different in Thailand than they are here. We didn't hide eggs for Easter, we went to church. We didn't celebrate birthdays either. Maybe people with money did, but I never had a birthday party as a child. For me it was just another day in life. Today, though, it is a tradition.

At funerals in the Thai culture the family takes the body to the temple and the monks chant for the deceased. The family cooks food for those attending. Thais cremate their dead.

### *National Holidays*

There are a lot of national holidays in Thailand but the biggest one is the King's birthday, December 5. This is a big celebration with a massive display of decorations and lights on every street and in every home, like Christmas here. The present king is now 78 years old and is a good King. He and one of his daughters graduated from MIT. We've never had a queen instead of a king but it's possible that one of his daughters may become queen.

April 13 is Thai New Year. This celebration is called Songkrant Festival. On this day the whole country gets wet; it's impossible to stay dry. People will throw buckets or pans of water or water balloons on you as you walk down the street. There will be a couple of hundred thousand people partying, dancing to music and drums in the streets and throwing water on each other. Usually the older people, like your mom or grandmother, do the pouring. The reason behind pouring water on your head is to bless you for a long life and to wash bad luck away. People love to see someone wearing a nice dress get water thrown on them. This festival is a big celebration and covers the whole country, so you can't get away and you can't get mad. This is the most fun celebration of the year.

October 23 is also a holiday in Thailand. This is the date that King Rama V gave up slavery, at the same time that President Lincoln did. Thai people still love King Rama V because they feel that they owe him for where the country is today, westernized and without slavery. In every single house and business his picture is hung and even taxicab drivers hang his picture on the mirror of their dashboards. Today's king is his grandson. The movie and play, "The King and I," is based on his life story but it is banned in Thailand. I personally love it, but the people of Thailand feel that it is insulting to the King and don't allow it in their country. They feel this way because part of the story is made up and they think it makes him seem too soft.

### *Childhood Memories*

A good childhood memory I have is the first time I went to Bangkok and rode on the tram. It went all around the city. I also saw a car for the very first time. I was six or seven at the time.

A bad memory I have happened when I lived in the village. One of the neighbors had a TV and would charge people to watch. He charged to pay for the electricity. I didn't have any

money so I would watch through the fence. He would throw water at me to make me go away.

Another bad experience happened when I was nine years old. My mom sent me to a flea market to sell candy that she had made. This was one of the biggest flea markets in the whole country and was held on Saturday and Sunday near the Grand Palace in Bangkok. For some reason, people didn't want to buy candy on that day and I didn't sell one thing. By the end of the day I was starving. Luckily, the guy next to me was selling noodles and he gave me a bowl of them. I didn't go back to the flea market again although I still sold candy at school and other places.

When I was eight years old my uncle taught me Muay Tay, which is kickboxing. "Muay" means boxing and "Tay" means Thailand. In Thailand this is a national sport, like baseball here. All young boys in Thailand learn how to kick, but it takes a long time to become good at it. When I came to America I went to fights here as well as in Tijuana, Mexico. Later on I became well known in Muay Tay as a trainer and teacher. I traveled a lot doing seminars on Muay Tay and sometimes took fighters to fight in different cities. In my restaurant today I have pictures on the walls of kickboxers. It is a sport I enjoy and still participate in.



## CHAPTER THREE: THE TEEN YEARS

### *Entertainment*

As a teenager I went to the movies every week or two. John Wayne and Steve McQueen were my two favorite actors. The most memorable movie I saw was *The Sound of Music* with Julie Andrews. All of the kids at school got to go to that one. Going to a Catholic school we got to go to movies like *Ten Commandments*, a classic. This movie was big in Thailand as was Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra*. I also liked *Popeye the Sailor Man* and cowboy movies.

I listened to the radio a lot growing up, and *Oh Susanna* was a favorite folk song of mine.

Back then there weren't very many cars, like there is today, and we would generally walk anywhere we wanted to go unless we had money and then we would take the bus. My dad got a car later on, first a Renault and then a Citron, both French cars. We had to get out and push the Renault almost every day to get it to start. I was only about fourteen at that time, so I was too young to drive.

There is no traditional age to begin dating in Thailand; it's up to your parents. I dated a girl when I was 16 or 17. We went to the movies or roller skated. There were no night clubs for young people then as there are now. When I first came to America we wrote letters back and forth but that was about as far as it went. I didn't date much.

### *Later Education*

I finished junior high school at age sixteen and passed a test for a two-year scholarship to go to Assumption Vocational School to study electronics. It was a private Catholic boarding school outside Bangkok. I went there instead of going to high school. There were 24 of us in the school and everyone lived in the dormitory. There were no outside students. It was a school for poor, smart kids. We worked our way through school by tending pigs and planting the garden, among other duties. They not only taught us about our chosen career of electronics but also how to survive. My mother died toward the end of the two-year program and I had to quit and get a job before graduation. But since I was a top student they let me have my diploma and therefore graduate early. At the age of about seventeen and a half, with an electronics and electrical degree, I took a job with Berijuker, a German company, as an engineer's assistant. One of the things the company did was install communication substations in the mountains and in the jungle. My job was to install generators. I went with the engineer wherever we had to go to install the machines. It took from two weeks to a month to complete a job. Some of the jobs were dangerous and it could get pretty scary. In the jungle there was no water and no showers. We could hear the Communists fighting and they would sometimes come down to check on what I was doing. Berijuker also did high power electrical jobs in hotels and other buildings. I traveled all over Thailand in this job.

### *Leaving for America*

When I was about eighteen and a half I came back to Bangkok. I was out with a friend one night and got stabbed in a street fight. I almost died. I was taken to the hospital where they told me that the cut had only missed my lung by about a half-inch. I was very lucky. While I was in the hospital my father and my brother Seri worked on getting me a visa to come to the U.S. They were afraid I would try to get revenge and either get myself killed or in a lot of trouble. After I got out of the hospital and recuperated, I went back to work for a couple of months until the paper work was ready. Then I traveled to Los Angeles via Hawaii. I arrived May 5, 1971, with 500 bahts which is about 25 American dollars. I was 19 by then. Seri had come in 1968 and Dalernsak in 1969. Seri had married a Mexican American girl and they were living in an apartment, so I stayed with them at first.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ADULTHOOD

### *Arriving in the U.S.*

The day of my arrival, May 5, was Cinco de Mayo, Mexican Independence Day. Los Angeles has a lot of Mexicans living there, so they had really decorated for the celebration. I thought I had come to the wrong country! I celebrated that night with my brother and his wife and her parents, Rauol and Maria, and others. They lived in Santa Barbara. That night Seri and his father-in-law showed me how to drink tequila with burritos and tamales. The meaning of Cinco de Mayo is not generally known here, but for the Mexicans it is like the Fourth of July for Americans. In Springfield the celebration on the square and at the Walmart on the south side is just an excuse for another party and to promote business. Bars are open and bands play, but I don't see many Mexicans.

### *Early Jobs in California*

I have had a lot of jobs. It was easy to get a job in the seventies, when I was nineteen. My first job in the States was at McDonalds on Westin Avenue in Hollywood. I met some new friends and we got an apartment together. I didn't work there very long, only two or three months. I didn't speak English very well at the time so they put me to work making milk shakes. I couldn't do it. Then they had me sweeping the parking lot.

I decided it would be easier to pump gas so I got a job at a Texaco station on Los Angeles Boulevard, up in the Hollywood hills. A customer drove off without paying, so I ran after him and yanked him out of his car. I tried to get the money because if we were short we had to make up the difference. I got fired. There was a little kid, probably about seven years old, who used to hang out at the station. I was teaching him how to kickbox. When he found out that I needed a job he told me that his mother owned a restaurant called the Bright Water Cafe on Sunset Strip and that she would give me a job. So I went to talk with his mother and she put me to work bussing tables. The pay was \$1.40 an hour.

The Bright Water Café was the kind of place where Hollywood actors, screenwriters, directors, and musicians came. In those days almost everyone who came to Hollywood to be an actor or singer or musician worked in a kitchen or waited tables. People came during all hours of the day and night to the Bright Water. It was always packed. I went to Hollywood High School during the day to learn English and worked at night. There was definitely a language problem while I was bussing tables, and I'm sure I had customers complaining about me because I couldn't understand them. One morning when the bar was closing, about 2:00 a.m., three boys came in and started pushing people around. They started poking and pushing at me and we ended up in a fight in the middle of the restaurant. Well, I am a kickboxer and I hurt one of those boys pretty badly. He ended up in the hospital and I ended up in court. When the judge saw me he laughed, because I weighed 125 lbs., and dismissed the case. The owner then decided to put me in the kitchen so that I could learn to cook. I began learning how to cook American food. I guess I had talent because they put me in charge of the kitchen in a month. I started using Thai seasoning and people really liked it. One of the actors who came in was a guy who played the chief in the movie F-Troop, about



*Hoyt Axton, Linda Ronstadt,  
and me in the Hollywood TV  
Station.*

Indians and cowboys, and through him I met the manager of the Troubador night club, Kenny St. John. Mr. St. John came in and ate and liked the food and asked to meet me. He told me if I ever needed a job to come and see him. Later the Bright Water Café had to be shut down because the taxes hadn't been paid.

I remembered Mr. St. John's offer and went to see him. The place was packed. He gave me a job on the spot even though he knew I was not legal to work at the time. First I was a cook and bartender and later bar manager. The Troubador was located between Beverly Hills and West Los Angeles. I cooked hamburgers and steaks and made sandwiches and salads. The kitchen was small but not everybody ate as they were there to see the show. The club held between three and four hundred people. I got to meet a lot of famous people--Elton John, Miles Davis, Sara Vaughan, Bonnie Riatt, Three Dog Night, Cheech and Chong, Paul Newman, Jimmy Buffet, Randy Newman, the

Smothers Brothers, Cher, Greg Alman, Al Terou, Tom Waist, Linda Ronstadt, Barry Manilow, Steve Martin. I mooned Steve Martin once! Just playing around. He's funny, and he liked me. He wasn't famous back then. He was just starting out, just a goofy guy. None of these people had made it yet, not even Elton John. One time I had to kick John Lennon out of the nightclub, but that's another story. I did learn a lot of English working at that club.

### *Higher Education*

The 70's were a prime time for Hollywood. For me it was a very busy time. I went to school in the day and to work at night. Bars didn't close until 2:00 in the morning in California, so by the time I cleaned up and left it would be 3:00. I didn't have a car so I either had to hitchhike or bum a ride home. Then I had to turn around and get up at 6:00 to go to school. That was tough. I went to school from the end of 1971 to 1976, first at Hollywood High School to learn English and then to an adult high school called Cambria where I got my high school diploma.. A lot of Mexican Americans, Asians, and black people went to this school, and I liked it a lot. I had a good friend there who was Mexican American. The actor Raymond Burr handed me my diploma.

After Cambria I went to Compton Junior College in Compton, California. I decided to take a major in



*Cambria Adult High School  
Graduation*



*Hippie days in Hollywood,  
California.*

photography and graphic arts since they didn't offer electronics. For a couple of years I contributed photographs and stories to the number one music magazine in Thailand called Impressive Song Hits.

While in Compton, I met a lady from Buffalo, New York. Her name was Carol Parker and she had come to Hollywood with her sister. I married her in 1974, but the marriage didn't last very long. In six months she decided to join the Navy. That was the last time I saw her and that was just fine with me. I had only married her to get the papers to stay in the country. She was a good looking blonde and very nice. It just wasn't meant to be.

Back then I was a hippie and smoked a lot of weed. I had long, colored hair. Everyone in Beverly Hills was a hippie in those days. People came from all over the United States and Canada to be in Los Angeles. They wore long hair, rode Harley Davidsons, were in gangs, backpacked, and slept on the streets. Most people didn't have a place to live, so they just hung out. It was a culture shock for me. Here I was, a good Catholic boy, and I became a hippie for five or six years. At least I had a job.

#### *Later Jobs in California*

I graduated from Compton in 1976 and quit the Troubador. I began training as a bartender for Don the Beachcomber which the J. Paul Getty Corporation owned. This is a chain restaurant, so when I finished training there they sent me to work in Santa Barbara. The company then moved me to Oxnard, California, and I stayed there for a while.

My next stop was in Woodland Hills which is located a little bit north of North Hollywood between Encinatas and Thousand Oaks. This was in late 1977 or early 1978, and I worked for the Tennessee Gin and Cotton night club. This was the most popular club in town and very big. They featured a live band, disco, and even had a game room. I stayed there for about a year and then decided to go back to Santa Barbara to work in another hotel but wasn't there long either. My old boss managed the food department in the hotel and asked me to go with him to a job in Claremont Pomona called Grisswold Old School House. It was a bar manager's job, and I stayed about six months. I didn't like the area very much because of the smog in the San Bernardino Valley.

During the five years I worked at the Troubador I had a lot of free time on my hands. I used this time being a beach bum and a hippie. I would sleep at the beach even though I had an apartment and a van camper. After a while the apartment got to be too expensive so I just stayed at the beach. I had saved back some money so I decided to go up north to Lake Tahoe and relax for awhile. After three or four months of this it started to get boring, so I went to Redwood City up near San Francisco. I had a friend there and got a job in a Mexican

restaurant called LaPosado. I wasn't there long when I was offered a job at the Ramada Hotel at the San Francisco Airport. I was the captain waiter there and learned about gourmet dining. My boss had received a job offer in Springfield, Missouri, and asked me to go with him. I said, No. I didn't want to go to the Midwest--there's nothing there! He called me from Springfield and asked again, offering pretty good money, so I agreed. In November 1979 I came to Springfield.

#### *Father Visiting from Thailand*

My father had come from Thailand to visit me and I asked him to join me on my trip to see the Midwest. We drove the camper from California and got to Miami, Oklahoma. We stopped at the toll gate and an officer approached us stating that he was checking all of the cars. When he asked if I was legal I said, "Yes, sir." When he asked to see my papers I handed him my counterfeit green card. I had paid \$200 for it in California in order to get a job. He asked me to step outside the car, and he handcuffed me. When I asked him why, he asked me if I could speak English. When I told him that I could he asked me to look over my shoulder and read the patch. It said "Border Patrol." They had an office in Miami and were checking for illegal immigrants. My father had a visa so he was legal, but they put me in jail as I was on an expired student visa. They asked me where my wife was and I told them she had joined the Navy and filed for divorce but that I had never signed the papers. Since they couldn't lock up my father they put him up in a motel. He couldn't speak much English, so every morning they would let me out to buy him food and cigarettes, and then they locked me back up. I had cash with me since I had closed my bank account in California, so I hired a company from Oklahoma City to post my bond. That took about five days. The officers were some of the nicest people I have ever met. The judge there had to decide either to let me stay or to deport me, and I got to come to Springfield. I came here to work at the Vintage House owned by Lloyd Kipp.

#### *First Jobs in Missouri*

When I got to Springfield the Vintage House was in the process of being built and I helped to get it organized and set up. Lloyd Kipp also owned the Tiffany Italian Garden in Tiffany Square, and I also helped out there. I was here about a year and then got in trouble with immigration as my visa had expired. If I could get married I would not be deported. I met Debra Preston and asked her to help me out. She agreed and we got married. My daughter, Chantra Maria Trithara was born July 27, 1981, in Springfield. Her nickname is Channy.

Not long after that Mr. Kipp went through a divorce and had to sell the Vintage House and eliminate assets at the Tiffany. My new wife came from Lebanon, Missouri, so we decided to go there and open the town's first Chinese restaurant. We named it the Magic Wok and served Chinese and Thai food. It did pretty well when we first opened. I met a doctor and a lawyer from Camdenton who came in to the restaurant to eat. They liked the food and told me they would back me up if I started a restaurant in Osage Beach. I was still young and decided to go for it. I opened the Magic Wok II in Osage Beach and worked in both restaurants, driving back and forth. I made a mistake and fooled around on my wife and got caught, and got a divorce. I ending up losing my restaurant in Lebanon. Business was slow

at the restaurant in Osage Beach during the winter months, so I went to Tucson, Arizona, to work for John Q. Hammons in the Palo Verde Holiday Inn. That winter I was a snowbird. In the spring I came back and reopened the restaurant at the lake. My partner moved to another town, so we closed the place at the end of the season. I came back to Springfield and worked as manager at the University Plaza for six months.

I missed the lake so much that I decided to go back to Osage Beach and open another restaurant. I had a partner in the business who was also a real estate agent. The restaurant was called Tong's and it did well. The restaurant was packed because I got everybody at the lake to eat there. The owner of the Four Seasons, the manager of Tan Tara, every single business owner and chef at the Lake of the Ozarks, people in the food business, hillbillies, people who liked good barbecue, families, everybody came to eat at my restaurant. We had a motto: "The place for the chefs to dine out on their day off." Unfortunately, my partner and I didn't get along and we had a disagreement. I found out later that he was trying to get me in trouble with the law to get rid of me. One of the chefs at the restaurant was involved and I went to his cabin to confront him about it. He lived right next door to the restaurant so when I closed for the night, at about 2:00, I went over and knocked on his door. I guess he was afraid I was going to beat him up because he started shooting out the window. This was on Halloween and there were a lot of people out in costume, so there were a lot of witnesses. He hit me in the stomach and the bullet lodged next to my spine. Since this is a very dangerous place to operate, the bullet is still there. The doctor told me that a lot of men from Vietnam still carry lead. I guess that was supposed to make me feel better about it. My partner in the restaurant had his lawyer defend the guy who shot me, so I realized something wasn't right.

At Osage Beach I partied at the lake. People came from all over, St. Louis, Chicago, Kansas City, and there was plenty of money to be made. Everybody loved me. I've got a good personality, served good food, and had a lot of friends, but that was the end of Tong's. While I was in the hospital they tried to keep it open but what good is Tong's without Tong?

I was flat broke, didn't have a job, and my health was not good. A lot of people from the lake came in and prayed for me. My family couldn't come to visit me because they lived so far away, but my little daughter did come to see me. She was two or three at the time. I thought of God and prayed that I wouldn't die. It was a wake-up call for me. I was a tough guy no more. I asked the Lord how I needed to spend the rest of my life.

When I got out of the hospital a lady let me live in her basement. After I had gotten back in shape I worked in construction and did other odd jobs for a couple of months. One of those jobs was a Christmas party where I met Scott Evers. He became a good friend.

### *Life Altering Experience*

A couple of months after I got shot, but before I began working at the Four Seasons, I got an obstruction in my intestines. My stomach kept getting bigger and bigger, and I managed to get myself back to the hospital. They had to give me blood, and since I couldn't eat they hooked me up to an IV. I couldn't go to the bathroom and I got bigger everyday. They tried

to get to the blockage but couldn't. They put a balloon through my nose and every day pushed it one or two inches down my throat to my intestines, but they still couldn't find what was causing the blockage. My doctor told me that they were going to have to cut me open to find it. I already had a vertical cut and now he was going to make a horizontal cut, which would make a cross. I told him to do whatever he needed to do to keep me alive. Then I prayed all night. In the middle of the night I needed to go to the bathroom, so I called a nurse to come help me. I was finally able to do my business. She took me back to my room and called the doctor. He came a couple of hours later and checked me out and told me that everything was working normally. He said, "Well, Tong, did I scare the crap out of you?" I guess he had. This had gone on for eight days. Finally my stomach started to go down, but they couldn't get the balloon out. When they advanced the tube to try to locate the blockage it had gone under the balloon and was tied in a knot. The doctor kept pulling up the small, knotted, plastic tube, but it wasn't coming out easily. He finally ended up jerking it out, and I screamed in pain and the tears came. I thought I was going to die; that was the most painful thing I've ever had to endure in my life. I had a black nose and my throat was sore for a long time. I hadn't eaten anything for a week, except ice cubes, and was weak. They kept me for a few hours until everything went back to normal. I called a friend to "please come and get me." I sat on the edge of the bed while I waited and prayed and talked to the Lord. I told Him that I had gone through a lot of pain with the blockage and asked how come I didn't see You. Many people claim that they see Jesus when they are about to die or are deathly sick, and my wish was to see Jesus. I asked Him to come in any form—a bee, a mosquito, a dog, anything to let me know that it is You. I was praying with my head down when I heard a voice say, "We see you have a lower intestinal problem and you are being healed and are ready to go home." Here I was wishing for the Lord to come in any form and I heard that. It was Pat Robertson on the TV praying for a person to be healed. I think the Lord answered my prayer and communicated with me in that way. I came out of the hospital and quit doing drugs and started trying to live my life right, to this day. People say they see God or Jesus all

the time, but I haven't. But I do believe that God communicated with me on that day through Pat Robertson. That is the power of prayer. Everything that I prayed for came to me. I have been stabbed, shot, had this intestinal problem and have made it through it all. Today I am healthy and strong. I still kickbox, usually on Sundays, and give private instruction in their house or mine. I also do 100 push-ups every day. Well, if I'm tired I don't do 100.



*At the Lodge of the Four Seasons*

### *Going to the Four Seasons*

When I got well I went to the Lodge of the Four Seasons to work. The owner had eaten at my restaurant often and liked the food and me. The executive chef, Andre Torres, said he would give me a bartender's job in HK's Steak House. There were seven restaurants in the Lodge of the Four Seasons. I got along well with all of the members and the employees, everyone loved me. The Lodge included a Racquet Club complex, the Tennis University, a grand slam stadium, clay courts, a nice hotel, and California style condominiums. Vandemere from South Africa was famous in the tennis world and he was at the Tennis University. I worked my way up to become the manager of the fine dining restaurant called Café Casablanca, after the movie, which was located inside the Tennis Racquet Club. They called me "Ricardo Tong." We had a big grand opening with lots of people from Hollywood in attendance. Bobby Riggs, the tennis player who was also a millionaire from St. Louis, came with his wife Mimi. She was my age and we played tennis together and became good friends. One time Bobby came out to ask me if I was the one who had beaten his wife in tennis that day. When I answered, yes, he asked me how long I had been playing. When I told him only six months he couldn't believe it. He said it was impossible, that I couldn't beat his wife. I told him she had beaten herself. I was just fast and kept hitting the ball back. The day of the grand opening was Bobby's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, and he had a press conference. Scott Evers had offered to take Mimi and me on a tour of the lake, so I interrupted the conference to ask her if she wanted to go. She took us up on it and we spent the day out on Scott's new Scarob. There were people everywhere and she was having fun, so we didn't get back until about 10:30 that evening. Bobby got a little upset with me about that, but I enjoyed playing "tour guide."

I worked in all the different restaurants at the Lodge--the Toledo Room which was high class and the main restaurant at the Lodge, the seafood restaurant, HK's, the family shop, the bakery shop, but my main job was at the Casablanca. Sometimes I would go to the night club called the Sixth Season. It was a good job and I was there three years.

### *Trip to Thailand*

I went often to visit Scott Evers, the man whose boat I took Mimi out in. He was from St. Louis and had a membership at the Four Seasons. He asked me to go on a trip with him, but I told him no because I couldn't afford to. He said he would buy the ticket and pay for everything, but I said no again because I thought he was kidding. He showed me two tickets and said if I wanted to go he would put my name on one of them. So I quit my job and we went, first to Hong Kong, then to Bangkok, Pattay Beach, Audhaya (my home town), to Chiang Mai, the Golden Triangle, to a town on the border of Burma, then south to Phuket, Ko Phi Phi Island, Phang Nga City, and then back to Bangkok. We were gone a month and he paid for everything. He got to meet my family. We stayed in first class hotels everyday and I had a limousine to pick me up. The reason he asked me along is because I speak the language and could take him sightseeing, shopping, to restaurants and make sure he was safe.

### *Working at Jamaica's*

When we got back to the States I came to Springfield to visit my daughter. A friend hooked me up with a guy who owned the Jamaica's indoor volleyball court, nightclub, and restaurant on Chestnut and Pythian. He offered me a job. I thought, I could go back to the Lodge or be close to my daughter. I took the job.



*Kickboxing in the U.S.*

My job at Jamaica's consisted of overseeing and operating the night club, the restaurant, the two indoor volleyball courts, and the four outdoor volleyball courts. I also promoted concerts, brought in the bands, oversaw the cooking in the kitchen, etc. It was a big, interesting place. We brought in people from all walks of life, from college kids to business people, white and blue collar workers. They could play a game of volleyball, listen to a band, dance, or eat. There was always something to do there.

### *Missouri Kickboxing Advisor*

I like to keep busy, and I never do just one thing at a time. So while I was working full time at Jamaica's I opened the Midwest Muay Thai Kickboxing Academy in a small building on Commercial Street. The motto of Muay Thai is "Mind Over Matter." Kickboxing became popular and I began putting on fights. Fighters would come from everywhere. I took the volleyball net off and set up a boxing ring on the sand. We had both amateur and professional fights. At this same time I was appointed by the Jefferson City Athletic Department to become the State of Missouri advisor in boxing and kickboxing. I was now on the boxing commissioner's advisory committee. Later on I became a state inspector. This was volunteer work but all my expenses were paid whenever I needed to travel out of town. My job was to keep an eye on Springfield by checking equipment and current licenses, physical checkups for the fighters and other duties. I later asked to return to the advisory position because as an inspector I could no longer promote fights.

One summer I opened a hip-hop dance club for teenagers at Jamaica's. It was on Monday nights, and no alcohol was served. We usually had about seven to eight hundred kids, and it was very successful. Then one night some kids got in a fight and one of the kids shot another kid, and that was the end of the dance club.

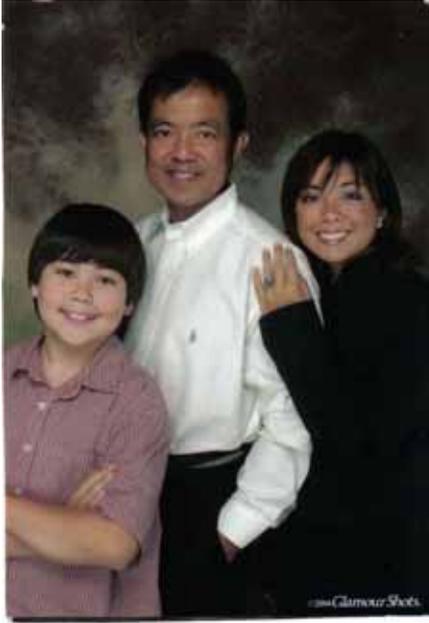
Later I started a country music club called Young Country at Jamaica's because I knew that teenagers needed a place to go. It was successful, too, and I did this for a few months before deciding to go on my own.

While I was still at Jamaica's I met my third wife, Michelle Black. She worked as a bartender there and was originally from Jonesboro, Arkansas. We dated for five years before we got married. We had a son March 28, 1993, and named him Dakoda Tong Trithara. His nickname is Ko. We later got a divorce and my son lived with me the first couple of years. Now I see him on Sundays. He and his mother live in Springfield and we remain friendly.

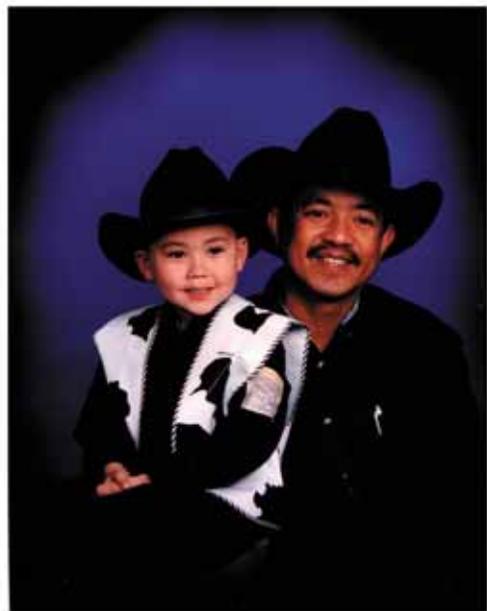
I started getting popular with my kickboxing academy and had articles in national magazines about my history in kickboxing and karate. I was a pioneer in kickboxing in the United States. I started getting people from other states to drive and fly here to study with me. In 1988 I started an organization called Muay Thai USA. People started inviting me to their town for seminars on the weekend. They usually paid for the plane ticket, food, and a small fee. One time I took the bus to New York, Toronto, and Detroit and then started coming back down. People invited me to their towns to organize and train groups of fighters. I also went to California, Calgary, Quebec, Montreal, Pittsburgh, Chattanooga, Louisville, and wherever else I was invited. I usually made pretty good money for a weekend.

I was at Jamaica's for five years, starting in 1987 and ending in 1992. I then started my own club called Tongway Twitty Country Corral. It was a non-alcohol dance club for all ages, located between Springfield and Nixa. Our biggest group of customers was high school age kids. I hired a cook to serve food as I was also working in Branson at the time. The Corral did o.k., but not good enough to support a family. My wife ran the club while I worked as manager of the Cowboy Café. I stayed in Branson from spring until winter and then came back to run the club. I closed the club at this location at the end of 1994 and moved it to Chestnut and Glenstone in Springfield. I changed the name to Planet Underground, but we kept the same concept--mainly teenagers, hip-hop music, and no alcohol. After about four years I managed to save enough money to buy some land at Kearney and Boonville to build my own club. I named it the Western Underground and we played country music there. Running both of these clubs at the same time kept me very busy. A lot of the other nightclubs in town began letting eighteen-year-olds in their bars and this caused my business to decrease. I ended up closing the Western Underground but kept the Planet Underground open for about another year. I got a divorce from my third wife in 1998. I opened Tong's Restaurant on South Campbell Avenue in 1999 to help support the Planet Underground but ended up selling the dance club property.

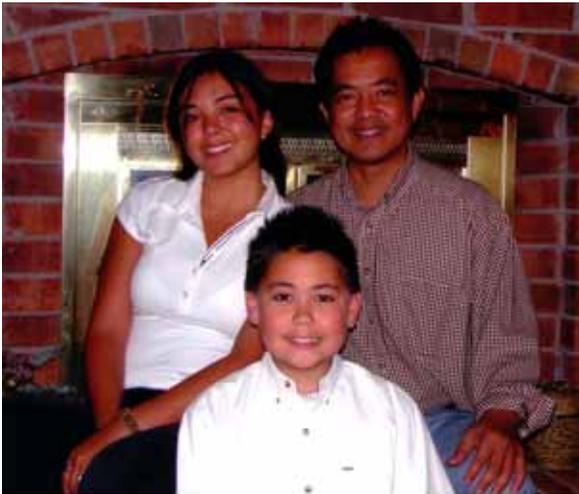
I have a pig roast every year at Thanksgiving, which is the anniversary of the opening of Tong's. I also like to have a Thai Luau around this holiday, with hula girls and Thai food. I sell tickets to about 60 people that I call to invite. They usually sell out in a day or two. I don't know how long I'll keep Tong's Restaurant; I can't tell the future.



*My daughter Chandra,  
me and my son Dakota*



*Me and Dakota when I had  
Western Underground*



*My son, Dakota, age 11  
me & my daughter Chandra, 23, in 2004*

## CHAPTER FIVE: LIFE MISSION

I think everybody has a mission in life. Mine is to become a millionaire! It probably won't happen, but I'm working on it! My real mission in life is to do good for people who need help, especially young people. I want to use my experience to help young people in trouble with drugs and other problems. I like to do kickboxing and it's something that I can use to help young people build confidence in themselves. I want to keep kids off the street, help them when they are not doing well, and give them a place to go. I would like to keep them from just hanging out and getting into fights on the streets. I feel like I have realized my mission in part as I have already helped a lot of people.

### *Highs and Lows*

My greatest accomplishment so far has been owning my own business. I work for myself, which means I don't have to rely on a paycheck. I am a small business owner. I was nominated for the Small Business Man of the Year Award in the State of Missouri and came in second. John Ashcroft awarded it when he was a Senator.

The lowest point in my life was when I got shot. I had nothing left, no job, no food, no strength, and I was lying in death's bed. I felt helpless, but I didn't give up. I owed the hospital bill and had no insurance. I had to help myself, so I got back up and made some money.

The high point in my life hasn't come yet. It will come when I get a million dollars! I'm still hiking up that hill.

A rewarding aspect of my life is the good health of my children and myself. God has truly blessed me in this area. I'm able to pay the bills on my business without struggling, though sometimes it is a push. I'm strong both mentally and physically. This is another blessing from the Lord. An important life lesson for me is not to ever give up because if you give up you die. I've been given two blood transfusions in my life, once when I was stabbed and once when I was shot. I don't know where the blood came from, a hillbilly, a black person, or a Mexican, but it doesn't matter to me, it was American blood! The most important thing in life is being in good health—eat well, live well, live comfortably. Whatever you lose in life, if you have good health and good strong hands, you can make it back. It's like building a sand castle; the wind and the waves come and knock it down, but you keep building it back up, over and over. It's the same with kickboxing. If I get my opponent down first, he's in trouble; if he gets me down first, I'm in trouble. You can't give up. When you get knocked out you have to get back up and try harder. I've been knocked out lots of times, it's part of the game. Mike Tyson, Muhammed Ali, Joe Louis, Joe Frazier, all these guys have been knocked out at some point in their career. When you're knocked out you are out for several seconds, but if you're knocked out for a long time you die. So when you lose, you have to get back up and try to figure out what you did wrong. It's the same with life, you have to get back up and figure out what happened and what you need to do differently.

Grandma Moses didn't start painting until she was in her sixties and the Kentucky Fried Chicken Colonel didn't make it until he was old. I have yet to reach the high point in my life; I may not make it but I'll keep trying. If I never become a millionaire I will still be happy because God has blessed me in so many ways. I have enough money to live comfortably, I eat well every day, I exercise, and I have a wonderful girlfriend. I can kickbox, which a lot of people cannot do, and I have a wealth of life experiences. I have a dream of competing in Brazil and Europe with my kickboxing that I hope to someday realize. To compete in the ring you can be up to 35 years old, but it's possible to kickbox up to the age of 65.

My grandmother has had the most profound influence on my life. She always told me to eat well, sleep well, and take good care of my health. She had me drink ginger juice when I was a kid because of its cleansing effects on the body and to eat herbal cooking. Thai cooking is cooking with different herbs such as lemon grass, basil, and garlic, to name a few. She also said to stay in this life as long as you have good health but if you don't have good health, then don't stay.

I have recently started another business called "Mai Thai Shop" with my girlfriend Laurie Anderson. We import gifts, novelty items, and jewelry from Thailand. I met Laurie after I opened the restaurant three years ago, and we had our first date on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. We went to the Fox and Hound and then to a 4<sup>th</sup> of July party.



*My girlfriend, Laurie Anderson, and me.*

## CHAPTER SIX: LATER YEARS

I don't expect or plan to retire soon. That's a long way in the future. I may end up retiring in Bangkok sitting in a noodle shop or maybe at a Buddhist Temple chanting to the Buddha! Who knows? My daughter loves Thailand, but my son doesn't. He's still young, though, and I think when he gets a little older he'll love it as well. It is a good country to go back to. It is rich with history and culture. It's the land of temples, and in Uti Province where I was born there are temples almost everywhere you turn.

I feel my special role has been to bring authentic Thai food to the people of Springfield. I serve good food and pay my taxes. I am against smoking. When I first opened a restaurant I put a no smoking sign up in the window and I think all restaurants should do the same. If New York and Florida can ban smoking, why can't we?

I spend most of my time working. On Sundays I spend time with my son and my girlfriend, and sometimes I play tennis or kickbox.



*Mr. Kipp, me, & Mrs. Kipp*

### *Special Friends*

The best friend I have ever had is Lloyd Kipp. He is like a father to me. He has always helped me out when I was down. When I was driving to Springfield and got busted in Oklahoma by the border patrol he gave me a job and helped me with immigration. When I got a divorce and needed a job he got me one in Tucson. If it wasn't for him, I probably wouldn't have been able to put the deal together to get my restaurant today. He loaned me the money I needed to get started. Every single time I have been in trouble or needed a job he has been there to help me.

I met Mr. Kipp through Mr. Bruno. I was working at the Ramada Inn at the San Francisco airport and Mr. Kipp was staying there. Many people stay at the Ramada because of its closeness to the San Francisco airport. Mr. Kipp hired my boss at the time, Mr. Bruno, an Italian maitre d' of fine dining at the Ramada, to open the Vintage House in Springfield. Mr. Bruno called me to come and be a manager for him. After two or three calls, I decided to leave California and come here. When I got here I told Mr. Bruno about being busted in

Miami, Oklahoma, and that I was not legal. He took me to see Mr. Kipp who at the time was Vice President of John Q. Hammons Enterprises. I told Mr. Kipp my situation. He looked at me and said, "You seem to be a nice boy; I'm going to go ahead and see what I can do to help you." That's how my friendship with Lloyd Kipp began. Lee Ganaway was Mr. Kipp's lawyer and he helped me get an immigration lawyer in Kansas City who completed the legal paperwork for me.

Four years ago when my teen dance hall was going downhill, Mr. Kipp asked what I was going to do. I told him I wanted to open a Thai restaurant. I had had three restaurants before, and I wanted to try it again. He asked how much capital I had to work with, and I told him, not much. My brother had died and left me a small inheritance which I used to get a loan from the bank. Mr. Kipp then came in and bought everything I needed to open the restaurant with his own money. When I needed a van to haul food, he sold me his for a very reasonable price. Every now and then Mr. Kipp will come across a recipe for Thai food in a magazine or newspaper and send it to me to give me new ideas. He moved to Florida after he helped me set up my restaurant but I keep in touch with him constantly. We speak on the phone at least every other week. When I need advice, I call Lloyd Kipp. I value and honor his friendship and that of his wife, Urith.

Juanita Jennings is another very treasured friend of mine. We met through a mutual friend over twenty years ago and she has been a very good influence on me. She has been a mother figure in my life, and everyone who knows her calls her "Grandma JJ." I took her to Thailand in 1995 to meet my family and we had a wonderful time. She gave me a loan when I needed working capital to start the Western Underground and Tong's. She has always been there to lend a hand and to help me whenever I needed it. She recently suffered a setback in her health and did not recover. I will miss her always.

I had another friend whose name was Johnny. He was a handyman for Lloyd Kipp's properties. In 1979 it was Johnny, Mr. Kipp, and I who got the Vintage House up and going. Twenty years later, we were together again. This time we were building my restaurant, Tong's. About a year after the restaurant opened, Johnny died. It was a very sad experience, and I miss him.

If my life could have been different I wish I could have been born into the King's royal family in Thailand or just into a wealthy family or had been born a cowboy! The bitterness and hardships of life and being poor in my childhood have taught me a great deal. I believe I am a better person for it, and although I would not want to go through it again I am strong because of it. They say what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, and I really believe that. I'm strong in mind today and calmer. Those early days in Thailand have given me many good memories.

### *My Faith*

I believe that my faith has a lot to do with where I am today in my life. To forgive and forget and to turn the other cheek are not easy to do. One of the hardest things I've ever done was go to the Camdenton jail to see the guy who shot me, but I felt that this was something that I needed to do. I went there to forgive him and to tell him that he didn't need to look over his shoulder because I was not going to be coming after him seeking revenge. I told him that I felt really lucky to be alive. I also told him that I hoped that the bullet in my body had changed two people's lives. It changed mine, and I prayed that it had changed his as well. I have seen him since in Springfield, and when he saw me he started to run away. I stopped him and told him again that I forgave him. At the time I was using a cane. I chose to forgive him and walk away rather than to let myself get angry. This man had a son in Springfield who got killed. He also had a daughter here. Someone brought her over to take kickboxing instruction from me. She was half-white and half Vietnamese, and I asked her who her father was. She told me he used to live here but now lived in North Carolina, and she told me his name. I told her the story of how her father had tried to kill me a few years before, and she asked me what I was going to do. I told her that she had nothing to do with it and that I had already forgiven her father. I also told her to tell him that I said "hello" the next time she talked to him, which she did. Unfortunately he doesn't speak to her anymore because of a relationship she had a couple of years ago with a black man. Her father is prejudiced. It seems that a lot of things have gone downhill for him. He has lost a child and now has a broken family. I can't imagine that he is very happy. It just goes to show that if you do good things good things will come back to you, and if you do bad things they will come back around also. I'm living proof of that. I had a wonderful role model in forgiveness, my father. He forgave the man who tried to kill him and his family.

### *An Exceptional Time*

If I could relive a part of my life, I would turn back the clock to the seventies. Back then I was a hippie living on the beach, enjoying the ocean, and listening to rock and roll music. It was the most fun time in my life. Hippie days were happy days. People were not violent, and reality was peace. Today it's skinhead days, blackmail days, punk rock days, chemical drug days. Today there is too much violence and too many chemical drugs.

Somebody asked me once if I had reached my peak. I don't honestly know if I have or not. I go in to open the restaurant, work hard, and go home. I've been broke a couple of times, but adversity can make you stronger. There are days when I would like to just quit, but I am a hard worker and I keep striving towards my goal. Friends and family are very important, you need them, and sometimes friends are better than family. My girlfriend Laurie is also a hard worker. She comes in to help me at the restaurant when I need her. I met her when she came into my restaurant to eat. She liked the food, and I prayed that she would come back. I was getting lonely, and loneliness can kill you. Isn't it amazing how life connects?

My wish for future generations is that kids will be smarter than this generation. Hopefully high-tech people will still believe in God.

*Comments on Buddhism*

The philosophy of Buddhism has many good things about it and nothing bad that I can think of, but I don't believe in it. It teaches calmness, forgiveness, and honesty, but it leaves out God. Many people have strange ideas about religion. I know a doctor from Thailand who was a Buddhist all of his life and then became a Christian. One day he sat me down and asked if I believed in God. I said, Yes. Then he told me a story about Jesus walking all the way to India when he was ten years old to study Buddhism. When he came back in his twenties to Israel he created his own religion and told everyone he was a God in Buddhism. A lot of people believe that Jesus is a hoax. Another man, an atheist from India, came in my restaurant once and stated that God killed Jesus. He freaked me out. I didn't want to argue with him, though; he might not have come back to eat! I just want people to have stronger values for a better way of life. Someone once told me that I should have become a monk. If I had been told that when I was a kid I would have laughed. Actually, a lot of people have told me that I should become some kind of religious figure. I don't know what it would be, though, because I would have to have a woman with me.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: MY SPRINGFIELD EXPERIENCE

I felt welcomed when I first came to this part of the country. I didn't feel rejected at all. I lived in Marshfield for a few months and then in Niangua for a while. My ex in-laws had a coffee shop there, the only one in town. I've been to Conway--had a Dairy Queen there. I've lived in several small towns and never felt any prejudice. Being a minority has not really affected me. When I was young and someone called me a "slant eye" or a "chink," I would start a fight. Fortunately, I don't hear that much here. There is prejudice in Thailand also, against Muslims and Chinese. I love it here and think it is a great part of the country. It is a God blessed country! I think the only ones who are prejudiced here are people who move in from bigger cities and bring an attitude with them. I can go with anyone and get along—black, Mexican, any nationality. I can go from Leroy Tong to Pedro Tong in a second with no problem.

Before I moved to Missouri from California I had a friend who told me not to come here because of the "rednecks." They also told me that Chinese were hung here. They were afraid I would be discriminated against because of my nationality. At the time most Americans saw an Asian and thought of Vietnam. They couldn't distinguish between different nationalities. But, fortunately, not everyone is like the KKK. In fact, this part of the country reminds me of my homeland in a lot of ways. Thai people are friendly and there are a lot of temples. People here are friendly and there are a lot of churches. I feel that when people are involved in a religion they are more likely to be moral and to practice what Jesus taught.

If not for the Civil War, I'm not sure I would have had the opportunity to come here, and if I did, I might not have been welcomed. The soldiers in this war didn't just fight to free the blacks from slavery, they freed the ethnic community as a whole to be able to come here to work and live in freedom.

I try to conform to whatever situation I find myself in. If I'm in the country I change my greeting to "Howdy, how you doing?" and carry chew to get in with the locals. The first person who offered me a chew was a kid from Reeds Spring called "Cowboy Red." He came into the restaurant wearing a big belt buckle and he spoke with a twang. He had red hair, pale skin, and was skinny. He gave me some cheap chew that wasn't too strong. I tried it and didn't get sick. The next day he came in and told me it was time for me to "move up." This time he gave me Copenhagen. I vomited for four hours. I'll never forget that kid. It taught me a lesson, too. Never take drugs, pills, or chew from anybody. In my fine dining restaurant I give people a cup to spit in. It's easy to tell who uses it by the outline on the back of their pants.

Both of my children were born and raised in Springfield. My son went to Sequiota and now goes to Pershing. My daughter went to Eugene Field, Pershing, and Glendale. Then she went to Arizona State University in Phoenix. She graduated two years ago. Both of their moms are white, so they are mixed. They didn't encounter any prejudice here and had no problems in school.

There is a Thai organization for students at SMSU. They come to me for donations every now and then when they have a meeting. Many Thai families here consist of American GI's who married Thai wives. At every Thai holiday they invite me over, but I often can't go because of work. There are thirty or forty Thais who live here, and they get together often. At SMSU there are forty to fifty Thai students. My nephew came from Thailand to live with me about five months ago and goes to SMSU.

After you hold a green card for five years you can take a test to become a U.S. citizen. I was living at Osage Beach when this happened and there was a big article in the newspaper about it with a picture of me. They called me "Tongway Twitty, New U.S. Citizen." The written test was given in Kansas City. They asked questions like who is the President and who are your Senators and how long are their terms. We recited the pledge of allegiance to the flag. We were then sworn in as Americans and gave up our old country. I love Thailand, but it has a class system. I love living in America, the freedom, the system, being able to say whatever you want, everything. So giving up my homeland for this country was easy for me to do. Plus, I have dreamed of being an American cowboy since I was a little kid! God Bless America!

## CHAPTER EIGHT: FINAL THOUGHTS

Thailand is a third world country that is still based on the class system, with the majority of the people poor. My family was a part of the majority, and I learned a lot about the bitterness and toughness of life because of this. When I was a small child I traveled from place to place with my grandmother, and if she hadn't been there for me, who knows where I would be today? I owe her so much for giving me a good beginning to my life. Those early days gave me a strong foundation that I have built my life on. If not for her, and living through the hardships, I would not have many of the positive characteristics that I have today.

I have had three pivotal moments in my life. The first was when I was stabbed while still in Thailand. It was because of this incident that I came to America. The boy I fought didn't know that he was actually giving me a blessing. I confess that I didn't realize it either until much later. He was the tool that God used to bring me out of poverty and into a country where I could be free to discover myself and reach my potential.

The second moment came when I was shot while living at Osage Beach. This close call made me realize how precious life is, to value it and not take it for granted. It also helped me come to terms with the fact that being a "tough guy" and fighting wasn't a good way to get through life.

The third turning point came when I ended up in the hospital with an intestinal blockage that the doctors couldn't find. When I prayed to God, he answered me and spared my life once more. I never saw Him, but when He spoke to me I knew God had a very real presence in my life. I think that most people don't realize how lucky they are to be alive. Just being here to see my children growing up is a blessing.

I have been on my own since I was seventeen years old. This was after my mother had passed away and right before I graduated from tech school. It was then that I had to start earning my own money and learning how to support myself. When I first came to the United States I had very little money but still managed to put myself through school while working a full time job. There have been several times in my life that I have had to basically start over. I am proud to say that I was able to make it on my own, without the support of having my family nearby.

I have been fortunate to be able to travel a lot and have seen much of the world, mainly through my life-long passion of kickboxing. It provided me with the opportunity to see a variety of places and to meet lots of interesting people. In my travels around this country, I have noticed many differences between other towns and cities and Springfield. Of all the places that I have been, I enjoy living in Springfield the most and plan to stay here. I am only 52 years old and hope to have continued success here. I love this area and the beautiful countryside. I love being a part of a growing community where the people are friendly. Since moving to Springfield I have been blessed with meeting many new people who have become good friends to me. The kindness I have been shown is amazing.

I would like to give special thanks to Mr. Lloyd Kipp. Ever since I met him he has been a constant friend who has been there whenever I called upon him, and he has never let me down. He has supported me in all of my ventures and taught me all that I know about business. He has been like a father to me and in fact has helped me more than my own father or family could have. I know that the Lord will bless Mr. Kipp and his wife Urith for all of the many blessings they have bestowed upon me through their friendship.

I have also been blessed with two wonderful and healthy children. My daughter Chantra graduated from school and has a good head on her shoulders. Right now she is traveling around discovering the world. I love her very much. My son Dakota is only ten and is also a good child that I love very much. He does well in school, and I hope he continues through college.

The most important person in my life besides my children is Ms. Laurie Anderson. Laurie has been immensely helpful at the restaurant, taking time out of her busy schedule to help me when I need her. Now she is also my business partner in the Mai Thai Shop. She is a beautiful person and I hope to spend the rest of my life with her.



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