

This article is © 1996 ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

TOUGH COOKIE EMERGED AS 'FAMOS AMOS' EMPIRE CRUMBLLED

Date: Sunday, August 25, 1996

Section: Spotlight

Page: 18D

Illustration: Photo

Source: Jeanie Straub

Jeanie Straub is a library assistant at the News.

Edition: Final

Former cookie kingpin Wally Amos loves himself and everything about himself, including his smooth, dark skin.

He also loves the king of fruit — the watermelon — in its entirety: the rind, the juice, the seeds, the flesh.

Why does the man who founded the "Famous Amos" chocolate-chip cookie empire 20 years ago mention watermelons?

Because some say proud black people shouldn't be caught dead eating watermelon — not in public.

"I'm well aware of the reason why black people, in most cases, advise other black people not to eat watermelon," says Amos, in town recently to promote his new book, *Watermelon Magic: Seeds of Wisdom Slices of Life*. (Beyond Words Publishing Inc. \$14.95) "For more than a century, white people have used the image of rural blacks enjoying watermelon by the roadside as a symbol of black inferiority.

"I was born in 1936 — there were no images of blacks in the media. And if there were, they were the shuffling, dragging-your-feet, subservient-type roles. You didn't see blacks in advertising, on television. . . . If you did see a black face, it was a waiter or a porter."

But every culture suffers its own watermelon myths, Amos says. To counter the subtle and not-so-subtle childhood programming, Amos prescribes silencing the messengers and reclaiming power by exercising choice. Whether to be dominated by a myth is up to the individual.

Amos, now 60, chooses to embrace the watermelon and recategorize it as a metaphor for life and all its sweetness.

That said, race fades to a non-issue in *Watermelon Magic*, Amos' fourth book, and he offers no apologies.

"I don't belong to black people," he says. "I don't belong to anybody. Why must I?"

"My daughter and I were watching Spike Lee in an interview. He kept saying, 'My people.' Is he only connected to his people by the color of his skin? . . . I think that we're connected by spirit, not by the color of our skin."

Yes, *Watermelon Magic* deals mainly in spirit, the insides of people, and especially doing and being. It's about how the loss of a cookie empire can lead a man to be a sort of Norman Vincent Peale for the spiritually hungry '90s.

Amos started as a skinny, low self-esteem kid from Tallahassee, Fla., who moved to New York and worked hard, first struggling up the ladder at Saks Fifth Avenue and later becoming the first black employee for the William Morris Talent Agency, where he vaulted from mail clerk to vice president.

In the interim, he promoted up-and-coming musical talents, representing the likes of The Supremes, The Temptations, Marvin Gaye, Dionne Warwick and Patti Labelle.

In 1975 in Hollywood, he opened Famous Amos, the first retail store in the world to sell nothing but chocolate chip cookies. After two years, the company was grossing \$1 million. *Time* magazine called him one of the "Hot New Rich." By 1980, it hit \$5 million.

But the empire, like a sugar high, collapsed, he says.

"I was promoting it like crazy and having good fun, but I forgot one little thing," Amos says. "I forgot to put a good management team under the flying carpet. The financial side was flying without a navigator, and before long, outside investors had begun chipping away at my stake in Famous Amos Cookies."

He had sold the last of his stake by 1987, and later, after a federal court settlement, lost the right to use the nickname "Famous Amos," his own name, signature, or likeness on any commercial food venture. But he blames no one and harbors no anger or resentment.

"The company hadn't failed me," he says. "I failed it. The lesson was humbling. I had passed on the name 'Famous Amos' to people I had no feelings for."

In the end, surviving those losses may have been the best opportunity to ever knock down his door.

Sure, mortgage payments still came due, but he says he never had millions in the bank even at his peak.

"I made a lot of money," he says, "but it was never enough, and I never kept it."

The Hollywood life of material wealth didn't translate into happiness.

"If you look to find meaning in owning things, you'll find that your things are never good enough and that they end up owning you. You begin to compare your stuff with other people's, and you decide your stuff isn't as good. Then you need more money and a bigger house."

Appropriately, the denouement of Watermelon Magic pushes the values of joy, creating your own reality and leaving dead-end jobs. After Amos lost his financial stake in Famous Amos, the new owners kept him on as spokesman.

"It didn't sit right with me. I did not like the people who had bought the company, and the fun had left the cookie."

He walked away, and yet today is still in the cookie business under the brand Uncle Noname (pronounced noh-nah-may) — a direct jab.

"Life is too short to be stuck in a job you hate with people you don't like," he contends.

"If you don't like what you're seeing, go to the projection booth and change the picture. . . . Don't let others into your projection booth — they may put a horror show on your screen."