

Chapter Ten

On the Road Again

*“We’d sell at the hotels and trading posts by day,
and hustle the trailer parks at night.”*



AFTER WE GOT BACK from Guatemala, we rented an apartment on the west side of El Paso. We started up production again in Juárez and put out our first catalog mailing. It was three color sheets, a lot smaller than the fifty-six-page catalog we put out these days. But I was thrilled to get back into using the mail to make sales.

Bonnie enjoyed getting back to civilization, and Sid loved that year. The backyard of our apartment building was two hundred acres of desert and every day he got to chase jack rabbits. We sold the Ford Econoline and bought a new Chevy Suburban and hit the road hard selling our products. When we were working a show at the famous Gene Autry Hotel on Palm Canyon Road in Palm Springs, California, we met an old cowboy named Bob Pruitt. Pruitt had been a champion professional rodeo cowboy in his younger years. After that he worked as a fearless Hollywood stunt man and performed at the Sahara Hotel in Las Vegas for many years. His stage show included trick roping, a bullwhip act, knife throwing and for a grand finale, wrestling a bear. Later, Pruitt put together

a wild animal show and petting zoo. He was one crazy old man. He retired from performing and made a name for himself creating life-size fiberglass horses for Western wear shops, super-deluxe mobile dressing rooms for movie stars, and fancy, high-dollar horse trailers.

We needed a larger trailer to haul our merchandise, so we cut a deal with Pruitt and traded him wool doubleweave saddleblankets for this beautiful, custom-made, snazzy, glittery four-horse trailer that matched the color of our Suburban perfectly. Through the years, we got to be big friends with Pruitt. His ranch near San Bernadino, California became one of our regular stops and our part-time hangout. Among the many things I remember about Pruitt was that anytime we went to a restaurant, he would always order number one on the menu. Didn't matter what it was, just as long as it was first on the menu. And I learned never, ever to dare Pruitt to do ANYTHING. That crazy old son-of-a-bitch just didn't give a damn what he did, or said to anybody, anywhere, anytime.

WITH OUR NEW SUBURBAN and trailer, we hit the road. In those gypsy days, we continuously traveled a selling circuit, mostly in the Southwest. In the summer, we worked Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Denver, Colorado Springs, Dallas, Flagstaff and Durango. In the winter, we headed to Phoenix, Scottsdale, Tucson, Lake Havasu, Los Angeles, Palm Springs and San Francisco. Some cities we hit year round.

We followed a similar routine in each city. We placed an ad in the local paper announcing, "Dealers Wanted! Come to the show at the _____ Hotel! 12 noon." Then we mailed five hundred to a thousand postcards to stores and businesses. We used the same postcard for years, a photo of Bonnie standing in a huge room full of rugs and saddleblankets.

We usually booked a hotel banquet room for a two or three day rug show. We hired a few bellboys to help unload our horse trailer and set up all the displays. We pushed the tables against the walls and put chairs on top of them. Then we hung the big rugs from the top of the chairs, and we hung the small rugs from the edge of the tables.

As we traveled around doing rug shows, we gained the confidence of

our customers. Gradually they trusted us to ship them merchandise sight unseen. So at every hotel show we weren't just soliciting new customers, we were also conducting our day-to-day business, shipping out orders in every direction. All the time we were on the road we had a friend and part-time secretary in El Paso answering our phone and checking our mailbox. So business went on normally wherever we were. Bonnie and I loved the fact that we weren't tied down to a phone and a location.

According to Bonnie's recollection, a typical day in Santa Fe went something like this: *"Rise early, dress, and go have a good green chile Mexican breakfast at Tia Sophia's. Dusty makes phone calls to local merchants, telling them we have something new they have to see—something they can really make a good profit on. I go straight to the showroom, pack any current orders and catch up on my bookkeeping. If old Sid—our German shepherd—is there, I take him for a run in the park. Midday is the busiest time when the merchants arrive. It is a real challenge trying to keep them apart. Small town shopkeepers are always jealous of each other. Once someone chooses a stack of rugs and puts something in their pile, it always catches someone else's eye, and they want it too. Fortunately, we almost always have plenty of each design for everyone, even if Dusty has led them to believe that they have a 'one of a kind' item.*

"Dusty is the salesman. I am the organizer and cashier. He tells stories and keeps smiling long after I reach total boredom. Some days, he plays games with customers just for our own entertainment.

"Some of the Santa Fe merchants were newcomers from New York and New Jersey. Their ultra-liberal attitudes are strange to us country folk. When Dusty and I think we've sold all we can possibly sell them, we take their money and start ruffling their feathers.

"Dusty leans back in a chair and sits scratching his stomach like an old southern redneck. 'Get those rugs loaded up for those folks,' he orders. You can almost feel the hair bristle as I obligingly throw fifty pounds of rugs over my shoulders. Little did they know that this was my preferred daily work out. Those women's libbers never caught on to our act. Probably one of the strongest components of our relationship is that we are able to have fun all the time we're working.

"After 7 or 8 P.M., we lock up the showroom and go for dinner at the Palace or some other really nice restaurant. Heck, we probably have more cash in our pockets

than most of the so-called 'cultured tourists.' We are having fun, living high on the hog and enjoying our independence."

SANTA FE DURING AUGUST was exciting as the town overflowed with movie stars and heavy weights from all over the U.S. Normally Old Sid stayed at Fun Valley with my parents, but one time Old Sid ended up with us at the Santa Fe Hilton during the high season. It made for some interesting confrontations, as Bonnie recalls.

"When we arrived at the hotel, I approached the desk clerk timidly and asked in a whisper if my 120 pound German shepherd could share our room. Expecting to be turned down, I was astounded when he boomed, 'That's no problem, Ma'am. We've got an orangutan in room 301.'

"It was true! Remember Clint Eastwood's co-star in the film Every Which Way But Loose? They were filming near Santa Fe. The orangutan not only had a suite, but every morning a chauffeur-driven limo waited by the front door for Clint's hairy co-star. The Hilton was crawling with young women hoping to catch a glimpse of Clint Eastwood, but only the production crew was ever seen.

"Another great thing about August in Santa Fe was that Native American tribal leaders from reservations and Native American communities all over the U.S. gathered for Indian Market week. This gave us a chance to deal with Seminoles, Utes, Ojibwas, Cherokees, Sioux and the members of other tribes from all over America. We sell more than ever to our Native American clients, now that many of them own thriving resorts and casinos."

LOOKING THROUGH our scrapbooks from those years is amazing. One town after another. Week after week. Sometimes we stayed in hotels. At other times, we stayed in our travel trailer. But even when we were staying in RV parks, relaxing after a show, we never stopped selling. I'd always make a show of brushing off the rugs outside the trailer. Pretty soon, someone would come up and ask what I was doing.

"Oh, just brushing off some rugs."

"Where'd you get them?"

“Oh, from Mexico. I’m an importer out here calling on some stores, and this is one of my samples.”

“Where can we buy these rugs?”

“I don’t know. I don’t sell retail. Only wholesale.”

“But couldn’t we buy a few?”

“No, no. These are my samples.”

“Ple-a-s-e...”

“Well, maybe since I’m going back to El Paso tomorrow, I could part with one or two...”

We’d sell at the hotels and trading posts by day, and hustle the trailer parks at night. We were young, energetic, and always looking for a sale. And in those days, we sold strictly for cash. We sometimes had as much as \$100,000 in the travel trailer, which I kept in tin foil in the freezer. We were just gypsy traders, working the American highway.

OF COURSE, some days went better than others, as Bonnie will tell you.

“One weekend in Albuquerque, we wanted to get off to a good start, so we chose to visit a trader we thought would be a guaranteed sale. On this particular morning we chose Manny Goodman’s famous Covered Wagon Store in the heart of Old Town Albuquerque. Manny greeted us warmly and gave us an order, so I went back to the horse trailer and pulled out thirty or so blankets. As I made my way clumsily back through the store with all this merchandise over my shoulder I took a wrong turn. Instead of going into the import section of the store where Manny was waiting, I got too close to Mrs. Goodman’s sacred ‘authentic Navajo Rug Room.’

“The strike of a rattlesnake could not have alarmed me more than ol’ Mrs. Goodman’s verbal assault. Seething and sputtering, she waved her hands wildly. Trinkets flew from the shelves and smashed on the floor. I lost my balance and dropped the blankets in a heap. Dozens of tourists in the packed shop eagerly helped me pick up the rugs. Much to Mrs. Goodman’s surprise, the shoppers didn’t hand the merchandise to me, they took it to the cash register. Almost every piece sold before it ever officially went into inventory. As Dusty and I left the store, we overheard quite a commotion from the back room as Mr. and Mrs. Goodman

conducted one of their infamous screaming matches. God rest her soul. She's gone now, but she wasn't one of my favorites. Unfortunately, nearly every little town has one phony 'Mrs. Goodman' type who runs a snooty, snobby gallery and condescends to everyone who doesn't share her taste.

"After that incident, Dusty and I needed a little fresh air, so we headed toward the Northern Indian pueblos. The day looked like it was going from bad to worse as a pick-up load of Indian women kept crowding us from the left, almost running us off the road. We stopped, hoping that they would pass by. They stopped too and approached us. What they wanted was for us to turn onto the road to Santo Domingo Pueblo and follow them to a house. There we found out that they wanted to purchase every rug we had with us. With a wad of cash in our pocket, we headed back to El Paso. That was enough excitement for one weekend!"

SOMETIME IN THE EARLY 1980s, we stopped doing our self-promoted hotel shows and began participating in organized trade shows. This was a costly change in our operation, but it helped us get to more cities in less time and gave us exposure to thousands of prospective buyers. The costs of a trade show run into the thousands of dollars when you add up the rent, freight, lighting, labor, etc. A foreign show can easily cost over \$20,000.

In addition to the regular circuit of Western and gift shows in Phoenix, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Denver and Dallas, we ventured at times to international trade shows such as SPOGA and Equitana in Germany, the Calgary Stampede in Canada, Heimtextil in Frankfurt and Hanover, Germany, the Milan Fair and even a gift show in Japan.

For eight or nine years straight Bonnie and I had booths at the Las Vegas Western Show twice a year, every September and January. In addition, we went out there for a few days a couple more times during the winter to meet the folks. I have never been one to gamble anywhere, especially in Las Vegas where I know I'm going to lose money—something I would not enjoy. Bonnie never gambled.

As part of doing business, traditionally we made it a point to visit the local library to photocopy telephone yellow page listings of Western stores, trading posts, gift shops and other likely customers that we added to our

mailing lists. One time in Las Vegas we asked a cab driver to take us to the library. He asked us if that was a bar or restaurant. He had been driving a cab there for many years but told us that was his first fare to any library. He had to call his dispatcher for directions.

My parents did a lot more gambling in Las Vegas than we ever did. Whenever they got the urge to splurge, they made trips to Las Vegas. During the early 1970s, they got to know the famous Texas gambler, Austin Preston, better known as "Amarillo Slim." Amarillo Slim was a super nice guy, who loved horses, dogs, kids and most of all loved to sit around and tell wild stories of his gambling adventures all over the world. He and Daddy were good friends. In the mid-'70s and all through the '80s, Daddy and Mother would spend part of the winter in Las Vegas playing poker and hanging out with Slim and other colorful characters.

Both my parents were good poker players. Mother played the smaller poker games and was always, always a consistent winner. Daddy played in the larger games. Sometimes Dad got into marathon games for twenty-four or thirty-six hours nonstop. He was well known and very popular with all the other gamblers at the Golden Nugget and the old MGM (now Bally's).

His problem was he was much better than the average hometown players but wasn't quite as skilled as the real Las Vegas pros. So for the most part he won in the medium games and then he lost his winnings in the bigger games. He justified that as winning since he did not lose his own money (or very much, anyway), a view that my mother and I did not share. Actually, my mother was a better, more disciplined gambler than my father.

Daddy was like thousands of other people, a wannabe actor. He did community theater for years, and out in Las Vegas, he somehow got small parts in two movies. He played a small role as a gambler in a film with Ryan O'Neal called *Fever Pitch*. He got another small role in a futuristic science fiction type movie called *Cherry 2000*. Both movies were box office flops, thus ending Daddy's longtime ambition of being a movie star.