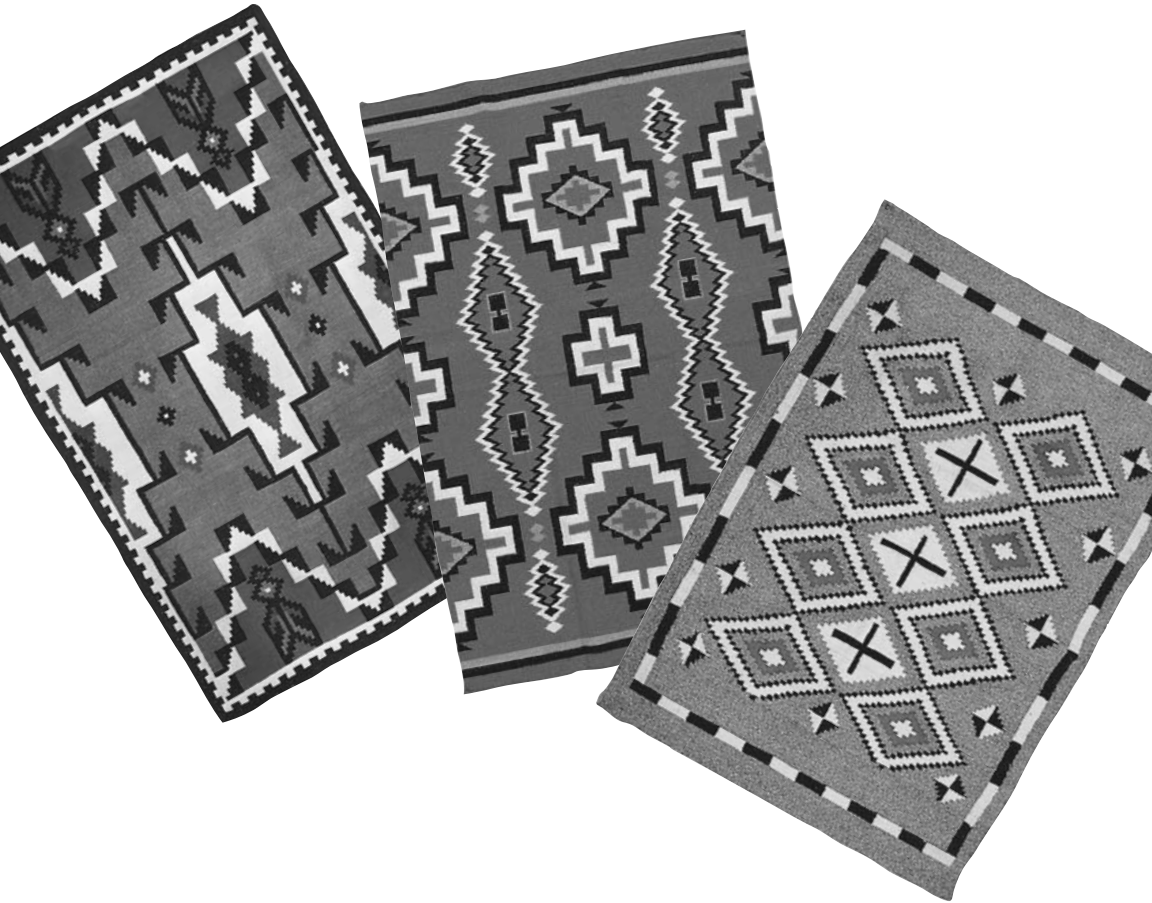


PART 3

Worldwide Adventures



Chapter Fifteen

International Markets

*“Forget the grammar and grace—
Dusty sure knows how to communicate.”*

—BONNIE HENSON



ONE OF THE BEST THINGS about being in the import/export business is all the pre-tax dollars you can spend running around the world buying and selling. I think travel makes people more aware of what’s going on in the world. We never travel just to sightsee. We travel to trade, both selling and buying. There’s no more fascinating way to get to know a culture than through trade. It gives you a way to meet people, a way to deal with them, a way to get to know about their customs and their economy. And it can also make you money. What could be a better combination! Instead of coming back from a trip with a suitcase full of curios, Bonnie and I come back with contacts, names, suppliers, customers and, very often, containers full of great merchandise that we can offer to others at amazingly low prices.

We travel continuously, into the interior of Mexico sporadically and all over the world, buying up everything from rabbit skins in Spain to cattle horns in South Africa to cowhides in Brazil. The characters I’ve

met. I tell you bro, you don't really know someone unless you've traded with them. Trade is the oldest form of human communication. Trade is older than language or politics or anything else. It's a noble profession, a tough profession and a great profession if you want to get to know people.

We traveled a lot to Mexico and Central America and across the Southwest as we established El Paso Saddleblanket. But we didn't really start to venture to other places until 1987. Bonnie can tell the story better than I can.

"In 1987, after El Paso Saddleblanket had settled in its downtown El Paso location, we launched a worldwide search for customers and products. We were already firmly established with suppliers in Mexico, Central and South America, but now we headed to the Old World. When our old travel companion, Sid the German shepherd, died there was a void in our life and fast paced travel helped.

"We've chalked up nearly a million air miles with American Airlines and a bunch more with Lufthansa, British Air and Air China. Most of our trips were for less than fourteen days, because, after a week or so, we started feeling too detached from the El Paso operation. This was before e-mail and overseas phone calls were difficult and costly."

WE TRAVELED DOWN TO BRAZIL and hooked up with a fellow named Herman Lorsche who supplied us with cowhides and sheepskins for many years until he passed away. Now his associate continues to supply us. It's always a pleasure to travel down to Brazil, go to their tannery and examine the high quality cowhides.

For a while, we were importing whips and quirts from Brazil. It was a good business, but we had some of the strangest clients ordering them. We sold one called "the cat with five tails" to some porno places in L.A.

On a trip to Brazil in 1980, we traveled up the Amazon River to Manaus. In Manaus, I met a guy from upstate New York. He had come to Manaus thirty years earlier, had married a Brazilian gal and had never been back to the states. He was running a little craftshop at the time I met him. He had some interesting items that he bought from the Brazilian Yanomami Indians: masks, baskets, and blowguns.

Well, I started buying from this fellow. After a couple of years we got to be pretty good friends, and we built up a pretty good business. We shipped the products to Guatemala, then reshipped them to the U.S. as Guatemalan handicrafts to get a special freight rate.

Anyhow, one day this old New Yorker in Manaus got into a bad car wreck and went into a coma. When he woke up, he was completely paralyzed. I called him up to see how he was doing and I said, “Hey, you gotta get better. We have business to take care of!”

The old boy knew I was kidding him along, but I think it helped him get a positive attitude towards his illness. He managed to gain enough mobility so that he could get around with a cane. He recovered and we did more business together.

OUTSIDE THE U.S., we sell to Canada, Europe, Japan and Australia. Australian people like our products pretty good but the freight is a killer, so we’ve never sold too much there. On the first trip I made to Australia, I traded some Mexican rugs for a bunch of “Roo” hides and boomerangs to a guy from Alice Springs (in the outback). I love the Aussie sense of humor and their seemingly carefree ways. Australia is a real party place that consumes more alcohol per capita than any other English speaking country in the world. Wow! I noticed how many people have all these great tattoos.

Canada is our biggest foreign market. To me, Canadians are a lot like us because Western Canada is like our West and Eastern Canada is more like the East. We really got along well with the French Canadians because they seem to be a lot like the Hispanic people here on the border in that they love to eat well and have a great time. We sell a little bit of everything in Canada. The people are fairly conservative when it comes to business, and they are more loyal to companies and products than us Americans.

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ONE OF THE MOST AMAZING SHOWROOMS I've ever visited was outside of Oslo, Norway. A guy named Eddie owned the place. It was way out in the country, and when we arrived there I couldn't believe it. Eddie had a 3,000 square foot showroom jammed full of fur coats—minks, fox, an unbelievable assortment. And here he was, way out in the country.

"Eddie," I asked, "you've got so much inventory. Where do you sell it?"

"Retail mostly," he said.

"You don't export?"

"Oh, no..."

I couldn't believe this. "You've got so many furs in here, and you're stuck way out in the country. Who buys from you?"

"One hundred people live in this town," Eddie said. "They buy. There is another town with eighty people fifteen kilometers away. They buy..."

He mentioned two or three other little towns in the area. I couldn't believe that such a small population could support such a big fur shop. I figured that Norwegians must really like furs. To this day, we still trade Eddie Mexican-baja shirts for reindeer hides.

COMMUNICATION is always a problem when you are traveling overseas. One time we had a little communication problem in France. I'll let Bonnie tell the story.

"I studied a little French in high school which seemed totally useless until we visited Paris in 1990. A taxi driver was being difficult and a real jerk. He was not taking us to the hotel we requested. Because I remembered a little bit of French, I told Dusty that the taxi driver was using the excuse that we had not given him the EXACT address—but we knew it was just two blocks from the Arc de Triumph. Dusty lost his patience, reached for the driver's shirt collar, pulled his head back and whispered to him clearly, 'OK, asshole, take us EXACTLY to the Arc de Triumph and we'll walk from there.' Amazing how that communiqué got through. All of a sudden the driver found the hotel. I learned from Dusty a long time ago that speaking correctly and communicating weren't the same. Therefore I have given up on changing Dusty's talk to proper English. Forget the grammar and grace—Dusty sure knows how to communicate."

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WE TRAVELED TO MOROCCO to buy rugs. I loved the markets, the traders, and the snake charmers. Bonnie came away with her own impressions of the trip, which she recorded in a letter to her parents. Not having ever traveled much, they enjoyed seeing the world through her eyes.

“MOROCCO: It does not matter whether or not you know that geographically it is situated in the northwest part of Africa... Think of it in your mind only as an ancient illusion... somewhere at the edge of the twilight zone.

“Jesus and Mohammed still exist. But today they wear Rolexes and fly in Lear jets. Snake charmers do exist and are quite common in the market areas. The casual observer might not notice their presence at first, because the snakes are kept under tambourines. If you express interest in a performance, they get the vipers out from their covers.

“I am extremely uncomfortable in the presence of snakes of any kind or size. We saw great pythons in the Amazon, but they were in a deep pit. Here, the cobras were a mere ten feet away from me.

“Because Dusty truly wanted to see this attraction, I sat nervously through several minutes of haunting flute music and writhing snakes. Just when I thought the worst was over, a final tambourine was lifted to reveal a creature that appeared to be a very close relative to the rattlesnake. My worst nightmare came to life when the charmer moved closer to me and tried to put the snake in my hands.

“My entire body broke out in a cold sweat. Adrenaline surged through my heart and stomach.

“I wanted to scream.

“I wanted to run—but I was virtually paralyzed by fear. Dusty jumped in between me and the snake and quickly moved me away. That may be the last time I ever go near a tambourine.

“Later, returning to the security of the hotel room, I collected my thoughts and wrote the following poem, which can be sung to the tune of ‘On Top of Old Smokey.’

*“On top of a camel, in the desert Sahare,
I lost my dear Dusty, he’s out there somewhere.*

*He went with the Berbers, to see the snake charm.
But they saw his Rolex, and cut off his arm.*

*I'm not a crybaby, I'm quite a good sport,
Just please save his blue jeans, he's got my passport!*

“About the people—have you ever seen an ant farm? Or can you imagine the way that millions of ants live in little tunnels? This is the best way I can describe the medina—the old city where the common people live. The city is entirely surrounded by thick walls with only two or three entrances. The streets are not designed for vehicles. . . These cities date back to the Ninth century! Some streets are about eight feet wide, some only about four feet wide. Thousands of people, some leading burros, move through these narrow corridors going about their daily routines.

“You never know what you will see or smell when you poke your head into a doorway. It could be a large merchant's house covered with fine tapestries, a workshop for copper or bronze smiths, or maybe a donkey stable. You see just about everything.”

ISTANBUL is another great place for a trader. In fact, the city has been a center for trade between East and West for thousands of years. Our introduction to Istanbul came by way of a trader named Fari. Fari was a Turkish guy whose family was from Istanbul. I met him while he was living in El Paso. He was doing real well selling tapestries of the dogs playing pool and the Virgin of Guadalupe and religious stuff all over Mexico. The tapestries were made in Turkey on some kind of velvet-like fabric.

Anyway, Fari was selling container loads of this stuff. He met a lady here, got married and opened up an Oriental rug store briefly in El Paso. I bought stuff from him for years, and he bought stuff from me, and we got to be pretty good friends.

Well, one day I said to Bonnie, “Let's go find us some rugs in Turkey. I've never been there.” Sure enough, we flew into Istanbul and old Fari met us at the airport. He was a great host. We had a great time visiting his yacht and eating at the restaurant his folks owned and buying lots of rugs and things and finding good deals everywhere. Of course, I'm lucky. I

have a cast iron stomach. Bonnie's perspective is a little bit different. While she was stuck in the hotel room one day recovering from a touch of food poisoning, she wrote this Old World travel account in a letter to her mother.

"Now let us stare out into the beautiful harbors of Istanbul, where merchant ships have traversed the seas for centuries. No amount of reading in history books can shed a true light on the complex transitions that brought about what is today Istanbul. Seeing the city pulse at daybreak is to witness a stage of characters portraying several centuries and cultures all reading lines to each other. Some in complete understanding, others frustrated and confused.

"A smartly dressed business man parks his Mercedes across from a centuries old Byzantine mosque. He tucks his portable phone in his briefcase and struts toward a fruit stand (a horse drawn cart). The few lire received by the vendor is warmly welcomed as it is the first sale of many, many transactions he must make during a day to support himself.

"Sometimes, the farmer's wife sits near the cart quietly cleaning and spinning wool. Some even bring live sheep with them if it is necessary to sell some of the flock. The animals seem quite content to pass the day mowing down weeds on a vacant lot. No one harasses the street vendor or his animals. There seems to be great tolerance for all enterprise.

"One of the livelier centers of commerce these days is the Bulgarian Flea Market. Poor rural people, recently freed from Communism, are flocking to snatch up cheap goods they previously had no access to. The rather dowdy scarf-covered women are not purchasing items of great value, rather more utilitarian. But the enthusiasm of the shoppers rivals that of a Japanese tour bus storming Rodeo Drive. Same excitement, different income levels.

"Istanbul has not lost all the glory of its past. The architecture of the ancient mosques is still a breathtaking sight. And most are NOT hidden by modern expansion because they sit as huge fortresses on the hillsides of the Bosphorus (the waterway passing through Istanbul).

"Istanbul is so huge it sits on two continents: both Europe and Asia. Some ten million people exist and trade in this enormous center of business.

"The Bazaar of Istanbul is quite an adventure. There are over four thousand stalls of vendors hawking their wares. The merchants are aggressive out of sheer necessity, but never outright rude.

“Again gazing out toward the water I see and hear a commotion of flapping wings and squawking birds. Seems the seagulls have a disagreement about fishing rights. In fact, this whole side of the world seems to be having disagreements with each other. There is such a tremendous clashing of old and new, political ties and anarchy.

“While I sit here so peacefully gazing at the ancient mosques, I am suddenly jolted back to the present when a fax is shoved under the door (an up-to-the-minute report of what’s happening at El Paso Saddleblanket).”