

Chapter Sixteen

The Wild, Wild East

*“After trading in foreign countries,
you realize how easy it is to deal with Americans.”*



BONNIE AND I FIGURE that over the years we have traveled to forty-nine different capital cities in Central and South America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Australia and Asia. Some of the wildest trips we had were in Asia. I call it the wild, wild east.

Take the Philippines for example. A huge country made of many separate islands. It's a tough place to live and a tough place to trade. I set up a deal in the Philippines to have a bunch of stuff manufactured: red chile ristra type jewelry and chile necklaces. In fact, I had a whole bunch of different chile merchandise that I had manufactured in the Philippines.

One of my contacts over there was a big trader. He lived in a building that looked like a fortress out in the middle of the jungle. It was a four-story building. He lived on the top story, and all his merchandise was stored in the floors below.

I bought a forty-foot container full of merchandise from this guy. And one of the things I bought was a bowie knife, a real big knife. What I liked about the knife was that it had a little monkey skull on the outside

of the scabbard. I just bought one for a sample and packed it in the container.

So we get back to the states, and the container comes into New Orleans. I get a call from the boys at customs, “Mr. Henson, you’ve got this monkey head on this knife.”

“Yes,” I said.

“Well, we need the scientific name of the monkey.”

I laughed. “Tell you what fellows, just go ahead and throw that knife away.”

“No, sir. We can’t do that. We need the scientific name of the monkey.”

Great! My whole shipment was tied up because they needed the scientific name of a fucking monkey! It took me two weeks to find out the name of that monkey. And for part of the time the port of New Orleans was charging us drayage time. By the time I got the monkey’s name, the whole operation had cost me an extra \$700.

BONNIE WROTE some of her best travel letters from Asia. She wrote them down right when we were in the midst of our travels, so they give a clear impression of what we were going through as we traveled around. She wrote the following letter to her mother about traveling in Bangkok, Thailand and Manila, in the Philippines.

“We’re in Bangkok, Thailand on the other side of the world. It may as well be the dark side of the moon—that’s how strange and far away it seems. I remember when I went to the one-room school house near our farm in grade school. All of us kids eagerly awaited the National Geographic to read about far off places like this. I’m not sure we realized they really existed. It was just entertainment. None of us ever dreamed we’d someday actually travel around the world.”

“Bangkok is beautiful for its architecture and landscaping. It should be a paradise, but there is a very dark side to its backstreets. It’s a progressive city, where free enterprise thrives. If you don’t have a good job or a good future, you can still make a lot of money by going into the streets and selling your little sister or brother to perverts, who buy them by the hour for sex. Nine to eleven-year-olds bring the best price. A little sick, yes? Yes, but it is true. I’d never mention something as horrible

as this, except that it is all over the newspapers here. The government realizes what a problem it is.

“Dusty is always interested in seeing the real ‘business’ side of a city. We walked miles through crowded streets and alleys, markets and red-light districts. The street traffic of both vehicles and pedestrians moving together is an unbelievable traffic jam. In a taxi it commonly takes twenty to thirty minutes to go one mile.

“One of the funniest things we did in Bangkok was to go to a restaurant called ‘The Seafood Market.’ Picture in your mind a combination of a fresh food grocery store combined with a full service restaurant. When you enter, you receive a grocery cart. You then go all around the edges of the building to select from the showcases your seafood, your vegetables, potatoes, bread, wine, fruit, etc. You go through a check-out stand and pay. Then you are seated at a table. A waiter comes to ask you how you would like each item to be cooked. It was amazing how efficiently they got the prepared meal back to the table. We had lobster, clams, oriental vegetables, fried potatoes and garlic bread. That was probably the best meal of the whole trip.

“In Manila, the poorest of the poor were asked to contribute money to benefit Imelda Marcos on her return. This is a woman who spent her country’s money on shopping for three thousand pairs of shoes! Why do they worship this woman? I’m sorry. . . I don’t understand. Can you imagine in Texas if the people who can’t afford enough milk for their babies were asked for donations so that Governor Ann Richards could buy cigarettes? It’s a reasonable comparison.

“But then, I am a visitor. I have no right to criticize those things which I do not fully understand. Only in America do we believe that every human has the right to grow, to earn, to live in peace and privacy. We are very fortunate indeed that our government cannot sell us like livestock.”

BACK IN 1989 we worked our first trade show in Tokyo, Japan. We had all our business cards printed in Japanese on one side and English on the other side as is the tradition in Japan. We learned that Japanese people are not impulsive buyers like we are because we did not write one single order at the show. We knew they liked the product, but it is their custom to go very slow and have meetings before buying anything.

However, we made some contacts at the show with a few companies that placed orders some time later. And we even had a couple of groups we met over there travel to Texas to buy from us here in El Paso. I remember one Monday morning this Japanese guy came in and picked out about \$10,000 worth of merchandise. The next morning we received a bank wire transfer from Japan for the full amount. Great, we thought. Then this guy came back the next day and picked out another \$10,000 worth of merchandise. Sure enough, the next day we received another \$10,000 wire transfer. We were really happy then. The next morning the guy picked out another \$10,000 worth of merchandise and we received another \$10,000 wire transfer. Then the same thing again! Anyway, this went on for five days—\$50,000 worth of merchandise!

The guy spoke very broken English but was so nice and pleasant that all of us really did get to know this guy pretty well. He stayed at the International Hotel located next to us, and every night he got hammered big time at the hotel bar. He had terrible hangovers in the mornings and he got so comfortable with us after a couple days that he went back into our shipping department, curled up like a cat and took a nap on top of a pile of rugs. He was such a super guy and such a super customer that that Friday night we threw him a private party with all our employees at the hotel bar. He got pretty drunk again, but this time he wasn't the only one.

A couple years ago, Sherman Barnett, owner of Barnett Harley Davidson, calls me and says that he's sending over this stretch limo full of Japanese people. They had just spent over \$500,000 with him on custom bikes. Sherm said the leader of the group owned thirty motorcycle stores in Japan, and he said, "When they come in, you won't have a difficult time picking out who's the boss."

Sure enough, the limo pulled into the parking lot. So, just for fun, I rounded up our whole staff to meet him in the parking lot. We lined up single file on both sides as he got out of the limo. We laughed and bowed and had a great time. He loved the attention and spent a few thousand with us that day. Sherman was right, there was no question who was Mr. Big.

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I GOT INTO a pretty interesting art deal in China in the late 1980s. You know all those ads you see on TV—“Starving Artists’ Show at the Holiday Inn, Sunday at 2 P.M.!” It always seems like they’re having a “starving artist” show at two or three different locations in any town. Well, all that starving artist art is from Hong Kong. Folks in Hong Kong buy it from mainland China and ship it over here. There’s no duty and no inspection of the merchandise. Why? Because it’s art.

So I get an idea. Why not have Western-style paintings done in China? I went to Gallup, New Mexico. A friend there owned trading posts and sold a bunch of Indian art, cowboy art, and other Southwestern-style stuff. I went to his store with a Polaroid, and I took shots of his paintings and hit the bookstores and got lots of ideas for paintings.

I had leads on two or three places in Hong Kong. I went over there and made a fabulous deal. I contracted these people to make these paintings. Of course, we had to work out some of the details. Some of the cowboys and Indians pictures had oriental faces! After we got all the production problems solved, I then went to Tijuana, Mexico and set up a stretching machine and a frame factory.

I sold thousands of paintings over the next few years, but the business turned out to be more trouble than it was worth. At least it gave us an excuse to explore Hong Kong. Although I don’t think Bonnie liked it as much as I did.

“In Hong Kong I can’t stand eating in the seafood restaurants because even though the fish has been dipped in boiling water, or tossed on a grill, the tail is still flapping on the plate when the waiter puts it in front of you. This is not my idea of a good meal!

“I’m ready to get back to El Paso. The distance from home is getting to me. Just one more day of tramping through the markets, things squishing under my feet, pungent aromas, strange sounds. I didn’t use the camera much, but my mind has ten thousand images.”

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OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS I have made several trips to India to set up production of products. Most of the products were new to our customers and included such things as coir (coconut fiber) doormats with South-west and cowboy designs provided by us, handwoven cotton mats with our special stenciled designs, art coral necklaces and beautiful leather animal figures.

India is the only country in the world that I go to alone. Bonnie is a very experienced traveler and has certainly been exposed to many different cultures, but I'm glad I spared her from these trips. India is a huge, sprawling, turbulent, poor country and traveling there can be a grueling experience.

The first time I went, other than reading a few travel books, I had no knowledge of the country and did not know a soul in India. I noticed that Indians made many textiles with jute, a hemp-type fiber. I also reasoned that if I got into the hemp/jute business and couldn't sell it, what the hell, I could always SMOKE it!

I figured that Delhi, being the capitol, would be a great place to start looking for products. In Delhi, the population and concentration of people is mind boggling. In 1947, when India got its independence from Great Britain, the population was about 350 million. Today the population is around one billion and growing rapidly. On every rooftop, under every bridge, in the median between roads, just everywhere, everywhere I looked in India, I saw thin, hungry, homeless people. I just couldn't help thinking how much I would like to have the Jerry Falwell-type, radical proliferers get an eye full of this.

The bicycle rickshaw guys all had about a three or four foot diameter basket sitting on top of their bicycle, where they curled up like a cat and slept. The soiled rags of clothing they wore were their only possession, and they were completely nomadic with no home. They made enough money each day to buy a few handfuls of food and survive to the next day.

Big, ugly buffalo cattle roamed around everywhere. People rushed to claim the dung, which they dried and used for cooking fuel. Thousands of men squat in a sitting position everywhere, as they have no hope of furniture. Sometimes I saw rows of men sitting like this on a fence and

it reminded me of doves sitting on a telephone line. All the sidewalks, buildings and walls were red from people chewing and spitting betel nut (a mild narcotic, not bad). Some men chewed constantly, and if they had any teeth, the betel juice turned them red.

North India is about forty percent Muslim. Most of the rest of the people are Hindu with a very, very small percentage of Christians. The Muslims are easy to spot because of their clothing and because the men have facial hair. The men you see in the movies, etc., with the turbans are Sikhs. The Sikhs follow a religion that developed from Hinduism but is now definitely on its own. Sikhs make up only a small percentage of the population, but they are a visible and successful group—engineers, military men, some merchants and clerks.

India is a very colorful country with lots of folks willing to cooperate with you on anything you need to do. Especially in the rural areas where I traveled, the poverty is unbelievable. Begging, starving people are the norm. I have seen some rough places in my life, but I was not prepared for the things I saw in India. Some of these guys made even the most hardened street hustlers in Juárez look like amateurs.

Anyway, my search for products led me to Agra and a Jain family that owned a jute rug and mat factory. The Jains people follow their own religion that is hundreds of years old. The Jain community is better off than the majority of Indian communities and is made up of, for the most part, merchants and traders. I traveled a couple of hours outside of Agra to meet this Jain family and arrived at this old, old, big warehouse and textile factory in the worst slum area you can imagine. It was actually more of a fortress. This very wealthy Jain family lived in a large apartment above the factory.

Just like the TV show “Dallas,” the whole family lived together—the old father Enkay and his sons Ajay and Sanjay and their wives. They all shared the same last name: Jain. I stayed with them for three days. We designed weavings, visited their factories during the day and had lots of philosophical and religious discussions at night. Jains are vegetarians, but do not eat any vegetables that are grown under the ground such as potatoes, onions or carrots. Also Jains eat nothing between sundown and

sunrise but can drink water. It was the strangest environment I've ever been in, and yet I felt extremely comfortable around my new friends.

In Mexico, our four-harness shuttle weaving looms are set up on a platform with legs like a table. In India, they build the looms flat on the ground, then dig a pit in front of the loom where the weaver stands and operates the handloom, thus saving the expense of putting legs on the looms. On my second trip to India and the jute weaving factory outside Agra, Sanjay Jain told me that, fairly recently, a big cobra had crawled into one of these pits and had bitten a weaver. Sanjay said the weaver was extremely lucky to be alive because the cobra needs to twist its head in order for the fangs to release all the venom. In this case, somehow the snake didn't give the weaver the full dose.

I started to look around my legs more carefully. Sanjay assured me, "Not to worry, Mr. Dusty, cobra comes only in Monsoon season."

"Well," I asked, "what season is it now?"

He stalled a little bit, smiled and answered, "It is monsoon season."

When we were walking through the factory he pointed to one of the weavers and said, "He dresses like a woman." Wow! A sure 'nuff cross-dressing transvestite weaver in India. I gotta say I've known and seen a lot of weavers in my day, but that was a first for me.

A couple of years ago, one of my business associates from India came to visit us in El Paso. We took him to a Mexican food restaurant. Several of our employees also joined us for lunch that day. Just for fun, I picked up a bowl of very HOT pico de gallo sauce from the center of the table and said, "Here, eat this soup." We all watched and waited for his reaction. His eyes turned red, but to our surprise he said, "Oh, yes, I like this very, very much. But in India we like it even MORE spicy."

I learned a lot about India from my Jain friends and enjoyed hearing their philosophies of life. My stories about life on the Mexican border seemed to fascinate them. We still do business and I communicate with them regularly via e-mail.