

Chapter Two

Texas Wheeler-dealer

*“I didn’t want to go to school. I wanted to keep working.
In my twelve-year-old mind,
I was already a successful businessman!”*



BY 1957, Daddy was operating the big store and had also opened three drive-in groceries, called Quickways, in three different parts of Abilene. We didn’t realize it at the time, but Daddy was pioneering the concept of the modern day convenience store. That year Daddy leased out the big store and sold the Quickway drive-ins.

His older brother, Arthel, had gotten rich in a very short time developing land and building G.I. financed homes. Uncle Arthel had bought and moved to a big ranch south of Abilene, and we bought his “dream” house that he had built only a couple years before. I transferred from College Heights Elementary School to the newly built Fannin Elementary School. College Heights was about ninety-five percent Anglo and five percent Mexican-American but Fannin was about sixty percent Mexican-American. From the start, I loved Fannin because I knew a lot of the Mexican-American kids from our store and they all knew I was the son of “Mac-ken-soon” who was very popular and fair with his Mexican-American customers.

After my dad leased the store to a large chain outfit, I got out of the sno-cone business. But I was still on the lookout for a good trade. When I was in the 5th grade, I learned that if you wrote to the Texas Game and Fish Commission in Austin (now the Texas Department of Parks and Wildlife) they would send you beautiful eight and a half by eleven-inch color pictures of Texas wildlife with a story on the back. I wrote away several times for the pictures and each time I received about ten. Pretty soon I figured out that I could sell these beautiful color pictures for ten or fifteen cents each!

I started writing to the Commission every day. First I used my nickname, Dusty, then my real name Richard, then my middle name Perry, then R.P. Then I started using made-up names using our home address. Soon all of the postage stamps around our house began to disappear. Business was real good for a while until I guess the Commission figured me out and stopped answering my letters. After that I got my friends and cousins to write, but once they got their hands on the pictures, they kept them for themselves!

Finally, one weekend I sat down and wrote to the game and fish commission of every state in the United States in care of their state capitol. No other state sent back pictures, but the mail did pour in! I was hooked! From that day on I've been fascinated with mail. There aren't too many things that excite me as much as getting out a huge mailing of new catalogs!

I WAS ALWAYS a second string football player and a C student. In all honesty, neither bothered me much because I really didn't have a passion for sports or studies and school was fairly easy. I was always a big talker and got along with everybody. The popular kids, the athletes, the nerds, and all the other groups in school accepted me. But it was the thugs who really fascinated me. They wore ducktail haircuts, black motorcycle jackets, and even carried their own cigarettes. I made friends with them. Most of them came from Sears Addition, a rough neighborhood near our school. Even though I was not a member of the group, I nevertheless

came under their protection. Whenever I got into a fighting situation, I almost never blinked or backed down, but I always, always stalled for time until reinforcements arrived to rescue me.

IN THE SUMMERS, my family spent a lot of time at the lake house we had on Fort Phantom Lake near Abilene. My uncles, Arthel and Shorty, also had houses next to ours and everyone spent lots of time together, riding horses, shooting guns, playing poker, and, (my favorite) fishing.

I was always particularly close to and loved my Uncle A. J. “Shorty” Henson, his wife, Aunt Ann, and their kids. Uncle Shorty owned a construction company in Abilene for fifty years and there were a million Shorty stories. One time, he cut off three fingertips while operating a backhoe. After the accident, he pretty much convinced us kids that a donkey bit off his fingers.

Another time, his brother, Uncle Melvin, ran a trot line across the lake. Uncle Shorty decided to mess with him a little bit and hooked a rattlesnake on the end of the line. Boy, was Melvin surprised at his catch that day!

NOW, SOME PEOPLE sit back and relax with a fishing pole and daydream. NOT ME! While I was never particularly athletic or studious, I was a Little Boy Fisherman Deluxe! Besides helping my dad run trot lines from the boat, I was into big time freelance fishing on the side. To me it was all about numbers. The more hooks you had in the water the more fish you could catch. I grabbed every rod and reel and every cane pole I could find, baited them, and stuck them in the water. In addition I had every conceivable type of drop line, throw line, and net. I also waded out chest deep in the water to set my own mini trot lines.

I tested different size lines and hooks, some with corks and some bottom fishing. I experimented with every type of bait. Dough bait for carp, drum and buffalo. Blood bait—liver or shrimp—for catfish. Minnows for crappie, black bass and white bass. Worms for perch and bream. Some baits, like frogs and grasshoppers, were good for several types of fish.

I kept my bait fresh, checked it often, and changed it constantly when the fish weren't biting. I also kept my eye on the weather conditions, the time of day and the depth of my hook. I was ambitious when it came to fishing. I knew those fish were out there, and I couldn't wait to get at them. I would get up early, fish hard all day until late at night, and fall asleep exhausted.

I liked fishing because I could see the "payoff" immediately. I didn't give a damn about what kind of fish I caught or what size they were, just as long as they were on the end of my line. Fishing was my way of getting recognition because it was about the only thing I could do better than the rest of the kids. I loved the attention so much that sometimes I took fish off other people's lines and claimed that I had caught them. Even worse, I used to take the fish, tell my cousins that a fish broke their line, then rip off their hooks and sinkers. I would do almost anything to catch more fish than anyone!

IN THE SUMMER OF 1957, Daddy bought an old cement block ten-unit apartment house in a Mexican-American neighborhood just one block from the big store. I was brought into the project from the beginning and loved it. First off, Daddy hired some carpenters and painters to help fix it up. I'm not sure where he dug up these helpers, but I can say they were colorful. Daddy paid me forty cents an hour to hang around and make sure everything went smoothly and everyone stayed busy.

After the remodeling was done, we went all over Abilene looking for furniture and appliances at secondhand stores and garage sales. We furnished all the apartments, and I was very proud of our job. The next thing we had to do was rent the apartments at \$10 a week or \$35 a month. This was the part I loved most, because I got to be the guy who showed the apartments, took the money, and the tenants came to me with complaints, requests, etc. Our office was two blocks away, and I spent lots of time on my bicycle going back and forth. I remember how happy and sad I was when I rented the last apartment.

Happy because we had no vacancies, but sad because I had nothing

left to sell. I liked the responsibility of being an apartment manager, and I liked hanging around with the Mexican-American families who rented the apartments. But most of all I liked being the one in charge at age twelve. I got along with my dad fabulously and we were both on the same frequency. We talked of doing more projects, but school was about to start again. I didn't want to go to school. I wanted to keep working. In my twelve-year-old mind, I was already a successful businessman!

THE NEXT SUMMER—the summer of 1958—we built a small strip center next to the big store with a barbershop, a beauty shop and Hawkeye's Diner. Daddy's big fishing buddy, six foot five inch Frank "Hawkeye" Span, was a house painter who had fallen on hard times because of a back injury. So they got together and opened up a blue-collar cafe. In trademark Mack Henson-style, we had a huge grand opening of Hawkeye's Diner on the Fourth of July, 1958. Regular size hamburgers were about twenty-five to thirty cents everywhere else. During our grand opening special, we sold a BIG hamburger with everything on it for ten cents. And boy, did we pack 'em in. People were lined up for about half a block waiting to grab a seat or place a to go order. One day alone we sold over 1,200 hamburgers. I was right in the middle of the fast and furious action. I loved it! Life was good.

The strip center also featured the newest business craze of the time: a coin-operated laundry. Maytag appliances were king. They owned the commercial market. We were one of the first "experimental" General Electric coin laundries. The GE washing machines weren't as commercially adapted as the Maytags, but GE was doing a lot of experimenting and improving their equipment. Daddy worked with the GE people and stayed loyal to them. They liked him a lot and offered to give him the financial backing to start putting GE machines in coin-operated laundries all over the United States. This was Daddy's chance to hit the real big time, beyond our wildest dreams!

In the winter of 1958-59 Mother and Daddy traveled a great deal scouting out locations for coin-operated laundries in Kentucky, south

Texas and Colorado. In January 1959, he chose his first three locations in the small Colorado towns of Alamosa, Monte Vista, and Del Norte, and was ready to start setting up the first of many planned GE coin-op laundries. Everything was set. Mother and Daddy were going to meet with the GE folks and sign their first deal on Monday morning.

On Sunday, the day before they were going to sign the deal, Mother and Daddy were driving on Wolf Creek Pass near South Fork, Colorado when they saw a “For Sale” sign on a ranch. The ranch was in the middle of the Rio Grande National Forest, with a big beautiful river running through it, huge pine trees, lakes, and two “postcard” looking log cabins. It was the most beautiful place my folks had ever seen.

Mother and Daddy never made it to that Monday morning meeting with the GE folks. Instead of laundry operators, our family became ranchers!