

Chapter Twenty

Hillsboro

*“I think we were ready for
some new project or adventure.”*



AFTER WE SOLD EL CID in 1999, we really missed having property in a rural area—the open spaces, room for the dogs (four German shepherds by this time) and just a place to go to. Business was good and we had made some money on the actual sale of the El Cid property (not the overall business venture), so we decided in 2001 that we wanted to buy a large ranch within easy driving distance of El Paso.

The search began. We looked at property in West Texas and all over southern New Mexico. All kinds of places. Some of the ranches were too far away, some were too desolate. Many were very overpriced. A lot of the ranches were twenty to sixty thousand acres: too big, too much of a cattle operation and too much work. The choices seemed either one or two-acre “ranchettes” or the big spreads. We would have liked to have had two to five sections. Also in New Mexico most of the larger ranches were a combination of deeded, Bureau of Land Management land and state lease land, which meant a lot of government control which I wanted

no part of. We looked around for about six months without much luck.

One Friday night I called Bob Shufelt, an artist friend of ours, who had a home and art gallery in Hillsboro, New Mexico. Bob “Shoofly” Shufelt is probably the best-known Western pencil artist in America today. He told me that he had just bought a ranch in Lake Valley, about fifteen miles outside of Hillsboro. Bob and his wife Julie were going to sell their beautiful historic adobe home in Hillsboro. So Bonnie and I agreed to drive up the next morning and take a look.

Hillsboro, New Mexico is an historic, high-desert mining town that was thriving from the late 1880s to about 1930. The town once had a population of around three thousand with some fourteen saloons and many brothels. Today Hillsboro is a village of about 250 residents; many of them are artists and writers.

I like to call it a poor man’s Santa Fe. It has two nice restaurants, two bed and breakfast inns, several galleries, antique shops and the famous S Bar X Saloon where artist and ranch cowboys mingle peacefully (most of the time). There is a clock maker, weaver, potter, furniture maker, several photographers, many painters and even a Hollywood film maker (not to mention several bullshit artists). There are some historic buildings, an Old-West-style boardwalk street front and an interesting cemetery. Percha Creek goes through the middle of town. Nine miles west of Hillsboro is another famous old ghost town: Kingston, which is one thousand feet higher in elevation and has a pine tree alpine climate with the Gila Forest surrounding it. The whole area is beautiful and virtually undiscovered. Hillsboro—these days known for its labor day Apple Festival—is only two hours north of El Paso but neither Bonnie or I had ever been there.

WE DROVE OUT to Shoofly’s Flying J Ranch and had some of Julie’s famous cowboy biscuits and gravy. We saw his studio and their stables with fine horses. We looked over his western memorabilia collection and saw Julie’s collection of just about everything: antiques, Mexican artesanía, art, pottery, Indian artifacts. You name it, Julie collected it. We went

into town and looked at their beautiful adobe, but quickly realized there was not enough yard for four rowdy German shepherd dogs.

On the way out of town we saw a beautiful fenced one-acre lot with a kinda hillbilly old house and a detached garage. The house wasn't much but we saw some possibilities. There was also about thirty acres joining that property that had Percha Creek going through the middle of it. That lot had huge forty-foot cottonwood trees, pine trees, cactus and lots of grass along with beautiful river rocks. The land was open and accessible.

The house was only about two blocks from the Old-West-style street front, post office, volunteer fire department, community center and library. Both properties were priced right and we quickly made the deals. Later we found out the thirty-acre property was actually Old Hillsboro before a fire destroyed it and the creek changed course around the turn of the century. The property had a wild orchard and was inhabited by deer, javelina hogs, fox, bear, bob cats, mountain lions, quail and lots of white wing dove. Absolutely pristine.

Bonnie did a great job remodeling the place. She completely redid the main house, added a separate luxury apartment suite and turned the detached double garage into a funky guest house. She did it in the modern Southwest, Taos style with large covered porches, new tin roofs and decorative tile murals inside and out. We installed new landscaping and a beautiful wrought iron fence around the main compound. It looked like a golf course. The thirty acres behind the compound were left natural. We put out feeders and watched a parade of wildlife everyday.

It was our getaway and we enjoyed doing the project as well as spending most weekends in Hillsboro. I quickly made friends with a lot of the townsfolk, including Rick Tafoya, a part Mescalero Indian who was born and raised in Hillsboro. We spent a lot of time fishing in the Rio Grande River and several large lakes nearby. Bonnie and some of the other animal lovers in Hillsboro had a booth at the Annual Apple Festival to sell products donated by El Paso Saddleblanket to raise funds for a local effort to neuter all the feral cats in town. The \$2,700 they raised took care of that problem. We also teamed up with local rancher Pat Jones and his wife Nancee to sponsor the monthly team ropings at the Way Out West

Rodeo Arena on their ranch. We entertained a lot of friends, spent lots of time with the dogs and enjoyed this stage of our life.

By 2004 the business was in great shape and I think we were ready for some new project or adventure. I had turned sixty by then, and although I wanted new challenges, I didn't want to get too wild or crazy and take a chance on any business setbacks at this point. I kept a close eye on the internet and began to understand it. I believed that it had endless possibilities. This proved to be true.

ONE OF THE MOST FUN and rewarding things during this time was the college class I taught.

Imagine that. Me, a C student and sophomore college flunk-out, teaching a class for college accredited hours to the six top senior business scholars at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). Dr. Frank Hoy, dean of the School of Business, handpicked the students. He is a leading recognized authority on franchising.

We got to know Dr. Hoy in the early '90s when he would bring visitors from all over the world to visit El Paso Saddleblanket. He also purchased gift items to carry to his friends on his foreign travels. In 1991 Bonnie and I hosted a reception at our Pennsylvania Circle home for Dr. Hoy, his staff and a touring group of about twenty Russians studying American-style capitalism. They must have liked what they saw in this country because we heard later that about half of them defected.

Throughout the years we have had a lot of people ask us about opening some type of El Paso Saddleblanket franchise store. From time to time we have had people open a store featuring mostly products from our company. Some have done pretty well, including one very successful company in Australia who started small and later was buying container loads. I have always advocated for stores and dealers to stock large supplies of our products, but never particularly like the idea of telling a franchisee what he could or could not do or sell. Same thing about

giving out “Exclusive Distributorships for Areas.” I always remembered what Mauricio and Julio Sidransky—the Polish-Mexican-Jewish traders from Juárez—used to say about “exclusive” deals back in the ’70s. They had a Yiddish saying that “There is one God, but not one customer.”

I had often asked Dr. Hoy’s business advice on various subjects; we had even discussed franchising some Saddleblanket stores on several occasions. I had thought about it, but somehow never could put together any significant concept.

He suggested that I teach a class at UTEP. Not only would the students learn first hand about the import business from me, but I could learn about franchising and about some modern business techniques from them.

It was settled. Class was to begin in the spring semester, January 2005.

Dr. Hoy taught an honors class Mondays and Wednesdays. I would lead a two-hour class and two-hour workshop on Fridays at El Paso Saddleblanket Company. The class had two girls, four boys, all of them Hispanic, with three from Mexico and three Americans. Just like Donald Trump in *The Apprentice* I explained our mission was to set up and organize our new theme stores that would be called El Paso Saddleblanket DIRECT.

I must say that these were some of the finest young people I have ever met or had the pleasure to work with. We worked to create prototype stores, market analyses, feasibility studies and franchise concepts. I never imagined how much work and time all this would be. Or how interesting and fun it would be to be around the excitement, energy and brainpower of these kids. We studied every aspect of the franchises in detail and published a complete summary. I spent a lot of time just hanging out with the students. The class finished up in May; all of them made an A+. When Dr. Hoy thanked us I confessed to him that it was one of the most rewarding things I had ever participated in and admitted that the whole thing was way out of character for me.

THE PERIOD from 2000 through 2005 was the golden years for us. Business was increasing. As our expenses for advertising, fixtures, equipment and overhead decreased, we had real financial strength for the first time—we were debt free. The whole operation was almost on automatic pilot.

We were closed on weekends, which gave us more time to relax. Bonnie played her grand piano more, we traveled some and I finished the original edition of *Rugs to Riches*.

Life was pretty good. But then life has a way of surprising you.

BOTH OF MY PARENTS passed away during this time. This gave me, my sister and my nephews and niece the responsibility of settling the estate and running Fun Valley, my parent's resort in Colorado. My sister Melba is very solid, sensible and fair. It was decided long ago that she would be the one to lead and carry on with the Henson family businesses. This was a very smart move on my father's part and things have been running smooth with her in charge. Frankly, I loved growing up at Fun Valley and learning the restaurant and hospitality business, but it was never my ambition to be in that business.

I was especially happy with our achievements and had very little to be worried about. On the other hand, things were going so well, I actually began feeling a little bored and unchallenged.

Bonnie and I have always been conservative in business. First of all I never had the stomach for much risk taking. I never admired the crap-shooting, bet-the-whole-farm-type of reckless deal junkies. Some make it big, but most eventually go under.

Do you ever remember seeing the macho cowboy T-shirts with the slogan "No Fear"? Well, I always wanted to have one printed for me that says "Total Fear," at least when it comes to business. I never wanted to lose any ground or have setbacks.

Usually when you read biographies of great business people, most have had some huge disaster of some type: big fire, natural disaster, bankruptcies and so on. In that sense we have been very lucky. The whole El Cid episode was a money loser, 9-11 slowed things a few months, some

products were not as popular as we planned. In the late '80s pastel color and jewel-tone rugs went out of style, causing us to sell some at a slight loss. But other than that we have not had much drama or disasters.

I still consider the Old West Hotel a great achievement, mainly because that's where I met Bonnie.

To me, May of 2005 was the end of what I will always call those golden years. That same month something BIG was about to happen.