

Chapter Twenty-three

The El Paso Saddleblanket Family

*“Bonnie and I don’t have kids—just dogs.
Our company is our family.”*



MORE THAN THE TRADE GOODS, the travel or the deal making, the most amazing thing about El Paso Saddleblanket has been our employees. Bonnie and I don’t have kids. Our employees are our family.

Dennis Rice was our first employee, and he’s still working for us. I met Dennis when he was repossessing cars on the Navajo reservation. He’s one tough guy, but he is also a champion of the underdog. Whenever I get pissed off at an employee or a customer who isn’t measuring up, Dennis says, “Just let me work with him. Just let me work with him.” He does. And as far as collections are concerned, it’s hard to believe, but our company loses only twenty percent of one percent of total sales. Hell, banks work at a loss rate of one and a half percent of total sales. And that is thanks to our collection man, Dennis.

Dennis, Irma, Carmen, Arah, Maria, JoAnn, Jon, Sergio, Veronica and Frank have all been with us between fifteen and twenty years. In fact, one

wall of our office is covered with pictures of our employees' kids. We love it when these kids come to work with us. It makes us feel like we've helped raise them all.

Bonnie feels the same way I do about our El Paso Saddleblanket family. *"Family? Kids? No, we don't have any. Guess we forgot. In our prime childbearing years we were spending so much time in third world countries that having children didn't seem like a good idea. But are we childless? Not exactly. Many of our employees came on board as high schoolers. We have shared their heartbreaks, the thrill of their first cars, the expenses of their weddings and the joy of the arrival of their children. When we want the companionship of a kid we simply invite someone over for a visit. I brag on them as if they were blood relatives. Four of the kids we enjoyed most are now in college. One of the four is an A student at SMU and another is a girl soccer star. I hope someday they look back and find they learned about life or success from Uncle Dusty and Aunt Bonnie. They worked part-time at El Paso Saddleblanket during high school."*

BONNIE CONTINUES TO SET UP scholarship programs for some of the kids who have worked with us. I like to train the kids and our other employees about the business world. What is my motivational technique? Well, nothing formal. Each employee is different, and each one has to be treated differently. Some you've got to really push, and some you've got to stroke and compliment. Most of all, you've got to keep them challenged. Money, of course, is the best motivator. If you can show your employees how they can make more money, they will gladly take your advice and then some.

I love taking our young employees and giving them a chance to succeed. I take these kids to a gift show in Atlanta or Philadelphia, and they go out and make deals with other business people. They're innocent and clean-cut and they do a great job of selling. Most have never flown and some have never stayed in a hotel. Believe me, I've worked hundreds of trade shows over the years, and I can get pretty burnt out. It's great to work with these enthusiastic young kids to keep El Paso Saddleblanket expanding.

For many summers, I chartered a bus and invited all my employees to Rancho El Cid for horseback riding and a mammoth party with a band. It was wild. Once we had 150 guests, all dancing and drinking beer. I also invite my employees to our home in El Paso a few times a year for a poolside party and to a Christmas party at a local hotel. The way we treat each other in the company is so unique that it was written up in the *Wall Street Journal*. Mike Dipp paid me a great compliment once. He said, "Treating people well isn't just business with Dusty and Bonnie. It's above and beyond that. They treat their employees as equals." All I can say is, we try.

OUR CUSTOMERS are also part of our extended family. Most of our customers are independent retailers, folks who own trading posts, small stores or roadside stands. We love our customers because we've been there ourselves. We've sold blankets at flea markets and at roadside stands as well as in showrooms. We know the problems our customers face. We know what products will work for them. And we know that they can succeed with our merchandise.

Desert rats! Yes, God bless them! In our desert here around El Paso and even more so in the New Mexico and Arizona desert live a breed of people we call desert rats. These folks typically live in small camping trailers or old school buses in remote desert areas. They come to town once a week to buy groceries and dump the sewer and fill up the water tanks, etc. Many of these people are artists, craftsmen and traders who work swaps, Indian powwows, street corners and roadsides. We sell to a lot of desert rats and many visit our warehouse. We really appreciate their business and wish them the best of luck.

ONE OF THE FUN THINGS about El Paso Saddleblanket has been the chance to meet a lot of celebrities and other interesting people. In the old days on the road we would work Tucson, Arizona hotel shows during movie making time at the Old Tucson Movie Ranch. Here we met

Steve McQueen and Arnold Schwarzenegger during the shooting of *The Story of Tom Horn* (1978) and *The Villain* (1979). Also actors Ben Johnson, Ken Curtis (Festus on TV's "Gunsmoke"), Slim Pickins, Buddy Hackett, Richard Farnsworth, and Wilford Brimley. Most of these people are very nice and down to earth.

We met even more celebrities when we opened up our retail store in downtown El Paso. For one thing, El Paso is about halfway between Dallas and Phoenix and is a popular place for traveling entertainers to lay over. We have casinos, Juárez night life and lots of things to do. El Paso Saddleblanket had lots of billboards for hundreds of miles in all directions that generated a lot of people traffic. And you'd be surprised how much word of mouth is out there on the road.

Over the years, we've met lots of the musical groups and western stars including Charlie and Hazel Daniels, Brooks & Dunn, Jeanie Frickie, Lenny Kravitz, Metallica, ZZ Top, George Thorogood, Highway 101, Tiny Tim and David Allen Coe. We've also met lots of Latino musicians, bullfighters and various politicians like Texas Governor Ann Richards, Lieutenant Governor Bob Bullock and famous people like Ted Turner and Jane Fonda and many more. Alan Funt came into the store one day. Thank goodness it wasn't a prank. He didn't say, "Smile! You're on candid camera!"

I used to get a little embarrassed when people bothered our celebrity customers with questions and requests for autographs. One day after a lot of gawkers came by the store, I apologized to Charlie Daniels. I'll never forget. He looked me straight in the eyes and said, "Dusty, I worked all of my life so people would ask me for my autograph." He made sure that every employee got an autograph and let them go inside his band's tour buses.

One observation I have made through the years is that most entertainers really, really love their fans and don't seem to mind answering the same questions over and over. I can remember how Steve McQueen used to spend hours hanging around the lobby and the restaurant of the Tucson Hilton just talking to anybody and everybody no matter how squirrely they might be. He was a huge star at the time and felt very

comfortable out milling around and was very patient with people.

It seemed for a while like every day or so we had VIPs visiting the store. For the most part it was a handshake, some small chit chat and then everyone goes about their business, but a few we really got to know through the years.

IN THE SUMMER OF 1976, we were doing our merchandise show at the Santa Fe Hilton when Billy Gibbons of ZZ Top came in and bought some rugs for his Santa Fe home.

After that, the Gibbons place was a regular stop for us and a guaranteed sale. We have kept up with Billy through the years and he comes to El Paso on a fairly regular basis.

We used to sell these sheepskin rugs that were sewn together like the large hide outline of a polar bear. They were really neat. They looked like a real polar bear. Billy liked these rugs real well. He called us from somewhere in Europe while he was on tour and ordered a bunch of these rugs to be sent out to different women. "Send one to Gigi in Paris, Lola in Rome, Heidi in Germany..."

Billy is quite a sport with the women and everyone liked him. He's easy to be around and handles his fans gracefully, always in total control. A short time ago he called from Los Angeles and told me that his new passion is collecting some kind of African headwear and primitive sculpture. He's been spending quite a bit of time in Africa lately, collecting.

LATE ONE NIGHT during the Christmas season of 1988, Andy Williams came into town for a concert. He was riding in a limo on the way from the airport to his hotel when he passed by El Paso Saddleblanket and noticed one of our large inside window neon signs had a pretty big electrical fire. He had the driver call the police and the fire department and insisted on staying until everything was taken care of.

The next day we went over to his dressing room and personally thanked him and gave him a saddleblanket as a token of our appreciation for

possibly saving the store from burning. He came over later and we learned that he was a hard-core collector of Indian rugs. We plan to visit him soon at the Andy Williams Theater in Branson, Missouri.

IN 1983, we formed a business partnership with two old famous rodeo performers from the 1940s and 1950s: All-around Rodeo Cowboy Champion Casey Tibbs and 1948 and 1951 World Champion Bronc Rider Gerald Roberts of Abilene, Kansas. The deal was that El Paso Saddleblanket would furnish and fund the leather and hair-on cowhides and sell our new product, "Casey Tibbs Cowboy Chaps." Gerald had a small factory to make the chaps in Abilene, Kansas, and he did the designs and manufacturing. We all loved Casey, but I'm still not sure what he really did for the business (except keeping all of us entertained). I don't think we ever made much money, but it was some fun times indeed. Bonnie and I were hard working and very ambitious "kids" in our thirties and Gerald and Casey were still crazy wild old cowboys in their seventies.

We were together many years and one day we learned that Casey was dying of cancer. Charlie Daniels and actor Richard Farnsworth decided that we should all work on raising money for a one-and-a-half size bronze statue of Casey riding a bull to be put in front of the National Rodeo Hall of Fame in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Charlie and Richard recruited us along with tons of folks in the rodeo and entertainment business to work on this project. They organized a huge celebrity fundraising party at the Beverly Hills Hilton Hotel in Beverly Hills, California. This was both the greatest and saddest event I have ever been directly involved in. We worked a lot setting everything up and HOLLYWOOD CAME! Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Rex Allen and on and on. EVERYBODY who ever sang a cowboy song or played in a western movie showed up. El Paso Saddleblanket made a big Casey Tibbs rug with his name on it that sold for \$5,000 in the benefit auction. We sold some of Casey's old cowboy boots and his famous purple shirts for huge amounts. Charlie Daniels and all the Nashville crowd put on a hell of a show. We easily raised enough money that night to more than pay for the bronze

statue. Casey was pretty sick by the time we had the party, but came through like a true champion. He died not long after that at his ranch in Ramona, California. If you're ever in Colorado Springs, please visit the Rodeo Hall of Fame and see Casey's statue. It's beautiful, and we're all very proud of it.

RENE RENE was a Latino music star back in the 1960s and was one of the first entertainers to record bilingual, English-Spanish, music in a big way. Rene used to spend a lot of time in El Paso and was extremely popular here, so we got to know him very well. He liked to come to our house and play the piano and sing along with our howling German shepherds.

WE GOT TO KNOW the Texas Tornadoes pretty well through the years: Freddie Fender, Flaco Jiménez, Augie Meyers and Doug Sahm. We had a great old 1959 Cadillac limo that we loaned them every time they were in El Paso. One day while cruising around with Freddie and the guys, the limo conked out. No problem! Freddie rolled up his sleeves, dug in and fixed the problem. He was a mechanic in South Texas before becoming famous.

Another limo story. One time there was a big celebration in El Paso for Father Rahm, a local priest who had devoted his life to working with the poor. Father Rahm was, and still is, revered as almost a saint here in El Paso. Anyway, the city renamed a street in south El Paso after Father Rahm and threw a parade in his honor. It was a big, big deal here. I loaned them the limo to drive Father Rahm in the parade. It was very hot that day, and we had no AC. To make things worse, the limo heated up and stalled out in the middle of the parade! The parade was live on TV, and the limo stalled out right in front of the TV cameras with our logo painted big on the side. A lot of people kidded me about that, but I swear it was an accident. The limo sat there, blocking the parade, until Father Rahm finally got out and started walking. Eventually, we got the old limo running again and gave Father Rahm the tribute he truly deserved.



ONE OF MY FAVORITE celebrity friends is Billie Sol Estes. Billie Sol is one of the most notorious wheeler-dealers in Texas history, who hustled everything from surplus Army barracks to cotton allotments to anhydrous ammonia before he went to prison. “Everybody has a little bit of wheeler-dealer in him trying to get out,” says Billie Sol, who’s been a free man living in Granbury, Texas since 1984.

I’ve always admired Billie Sol for some reason or other. I guess I just admire the fact that he is a masterful deal maker, although some of his deals didn’t turn out so well. One of the most interesting things about Billie Sol is that he has absolutely no ego. Instead of telling you how great he is, he likes to tell you how great you are. Many folks in Texas revere him as some kind of folk hero, like Robin Hood or Jesse James.

A few years back, I invited Billie Sol into El Paso and got him on a popular radio talk show hosted by my friend Paul Strelzin. They were talking along, when Billie Sol announced that he was going on a national tour to give his money away—and that he was going to start his tour at the H & H Carwash in El Paso at 10 A.M. the following day. Everyone was surprised to hear that, especially my friends Kenny and Maynard Haddad who own the carwash. Well, a big crowd gathered to see what was going to happen. Billie Sol didn’t give all his money away, but he did give away a stack of two dollar bills and autographed each one, “I’ve been swindled by Billie Sol Estes...”