

## Chapter Six

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# The Old West Hotel

*“I packed the place full of merchandise.  
We sold everything—from candles to my cousin’s pottery.”*



**MY FAMILY’S BUSINESS**—Fun Valley Resort in South Fork, Colorado—has always been geared more toward the middle class family vacationers rather than the jet setters or the rich and famous. But we did get some famous guests through the years. Back in the mid-1960s, Texas Governor Preston Smith from Lubbock was a regular Fun Valley guest, before, during and after his term. He was a nice man and a good tipper who really liked fly-fishing.

Square dancing was always a major part of Fun Valley’s entertainment and my dad knew square dance callers and square dances all over the country and especially in Texas. When Governor Smith was elected to his second term, Daddy suggested to the governor that he host the first ever Square Dance Inaugural Ball in Austin. The idea caught on, and the location had to be changed several times as the guest list swelled. Daddy had my mother send a letter to President Johnson inviting him to the dance. And I’ll be damned, one morning the **PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED**

STATES called Mack Henson and apologized for being unable to attend the function.

As you might expect, the first ever Governor's Inaugural Square Dance, in 1966, was a huge success and about 1,500 attended. Daddy was the master of ceremonies, mother was the official greeter, and Fun Valley brochures and summer square dance schedules were everywhere. When the Governor's entourage entered, Daddy asked the crowd to please make way, and the crowd parted like the Red Sea parting for the Israelites. Governor Smith stepped up to the microphone, made a short speech and thanked everyone for coming to the 1966 first ever Texas Square Dance Inaugural Ball.

TWENTY MILES from Fun Valley is the town of Del Norte. It's not a resort town. It's a typical small Colorado town located in the San Luis Valley in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Right in the middle of town stood an old hotel. It was a typical small town hotel with rooms upstairs, and stores on the ground floor. For some reason, Daddy bought the place in 1969. He paid \$19,000 for it, \$3,000 down. That same year, he bought the Spruce Ski Lodge in South Fork for my brother Bennie to manage.

I managed the hotel and began splitting my time between El Paso and Colorado. The hotel wasn't run down. It was just old, built in 1872. The previous owner had half of the stores on the first floor rented. The first thing we did was to say, "We're gonna need this space back. We'll help you get a new place, but we're gonna need this space." Of course there wasn't a written contract anywhere. So we took over all the stores on both sides of the building and put the hotel office right on the corner of the block.

We built an old-timey boardwalk around the front of the building, and a balcony around the second floor. You had to climb out of the window to get to the balcony, but that was OK. We built a fountain in the back courtyard, and we painted gunfighters on the wall. James Richards, my cousin, even made a big cowboy head that we put on the corner of the building.

We tore down all the walls between the stores on each side to make one big store. After we gutted those stores we set up a kind of Wild West shopping mall with all kinds of crafts shops and curio shops. James Richards had graduated from Texas Tech and set up a pottery shop. I had a leather store, a Mexico import shop, and a cowboy and Indian store. We had a cowboy artist in the store for two years. That was back in the old hippie times, although I never considered myself a hippie because I was too interested in making money. But we did have a candle shop.

I MANAGED THE OLD WEST HOTEL in the summertime. We had thirty-two rooms, most had private baths, some had adjoining baths and a few of them, like old room Number 9, had neither. The bath was down the hall European style. I liked to be the one renting the rooms, especially when the whole town was gettin' full. I never did really take advantage of people, but I did like getting the higher prices.

One time a guy came in and asked, "Gotta room?"

"Yessir," I said, "I got a nice room for \$18."

"Hmmm... eighteen bucks. I don't think so. I guess I'll just go sleep in my truck."

"Now hold on," I said. I carefully studied my guest book. "OK," I said. "Here's a pretty nice room for \$15."

"Oh, that's a little high," he said. "I guess I'll just go on down the road."

"Well," I sighed. "I do have one room. I've been meaning to paint it but I haven't got around to it yet..."

The fellow looked interested. "How much is that room?"

"I'll let you have it for twelve bucks."

"OK, I'll take it."

I was selling the same room all along. It was the last room in the hotel, old Number 9.

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SOMETIMES, things were pretty slow at the hotel, especially in the winter. Sitting around the lobby in the winter of '69 my cousin James and I were reading the *Denver Post* when I noticed an article about how the Boston Strangler—Albert DeSalva—was making jewelry in jail. It was hippie times, you know, and everything was all anti-establishment. I got to thinking and I said to my cousin, "What if we get the Boston Strangler to make us a casting of a choker with little hands around the neck? I bet we could sell the hell out of a choker made by the Boston Strangler."

We laughed about the idea. Then I actually sent a letter off to Albert DeSalva. I didn't say anything about the choker in the letter. I just said that I'd read the article and wondered if he would be interested in making some jewelry for us.

A couple of weeks later, I got an answer in the mail. I was real excited, you know, and nervous. I opened the letter and started reading. And the first line of the letter read, "Mr. Henson, Your letter chilled me..."

Imagine, my letter chilled the Boston Strangler!

Well, the reason that it chilled him didn't have anything to do with the jewelry idea. It was because his stepdaughter lived in Colorado. But I've always liked the fact that my letter chilled the Boston Strangler. We never did get it together to make the chokers, because somebody killed him in prison.

AS THE '60S CAME TO A CLOSE, I was out of the Army and itching to go out and take on the world! I spent more and more time in Mexico, and I decided that I wanted to make my living importing and selling Mexican curios and jewelry.

*"Poor Mexico, poor Mexico... so far from God, but so close to the United States...."*

—porfirio diaz, 1910

In those early years, I fell in love with Mexico and with doing business in Mexico. Mexico business can either be the best, most fun time you've ever had or an absolute nightmare. It's usually a little bit of both. I love Mexico and the Mexican people with all my heart, but you always must

remember that this is a very different country and can test your patience. It's a different way of business. It's a different culture.

The first thing I learned about trading in Mexico was that I'd better learn to speak Spanish. There is no substitute for knowing the language. I learned early on that because folks don't speak English doesn't mean they are dumb. And even if they act a little bit slow, it could well be just an act. I took some classes and taught myself and continued teaching myself for the next thirty years.

THE FIRST MISTAKE traders make in Mexico is being haughty or giving the impression that they are superior. It's that old thing about "Big Brother United States." You can't go into Mexico thinking like a big-shot American or you're going to have problems real quick.

I learned that the worst thing to do in Mexico was to make comparisons. Every culture is different, and when you are doing business in another country, you must respect their culture. Especially in Mexico, it is important to be very polite and show genuine respect for their culture, family and country. I learned quickly to be careful when making jokes or saying anything that might be taken wrong.

Basically what I learned as a young man trading in Mexico can be summed up as follows:

- Don't take advantage of people.
- Don't beat them down on price too much.
- But don't let them retire off you.
- Keep your people coming back.
- Never apologize for making money.

Even though I worked pretty hard, sharpened my skills at selling, learned Spanish and had the basic desire and ambition to be independent, I was not very successful. I was single and not well disciplined at all. You know, spending way too much time drinking, doping, after-hours gambling and getting well acquainted with all the bars and "whatever" joints in infamous Juárez, Mexico.



EVEN WHILE I was running the hotel and trading goods from Mexico, I couldn't help but come up with other money-making schemes. My favorite was "The Truth About Mexican Dentures."

It was an information business. I put a classified ad in the small-town newspapers within a couple of hundred miles of El Paso. I also ran classified ads in *Field and Stream*, *Senior Living* and other publications that were popular with older retired folks. The ad read something like this, "Mexican Dentures...\$70 for upper and lower plates...For more information send name, address and \$1 to The Truth About Mexican Dentures, P.O. Box 12360, El Paso, Texas."

When someone sent me a dollar, I sent them a list of denture clinics and prices in Juárez, and some general information about how to get there, where to stay and where to eat. The business never was hugely successful, but it drew a steady stream of dollar bills. Years later, I still got letters every once in a while, asking for The Truth About Mexican Dentures.

THE OLD WEST HOTEL quickly became one of the biggest tourist attractions in southern Colorado. One of the best experiences I had at the hotel was when a blonde haired, hazel-eyed young lady walked in with a proposition I couldn't refuse.