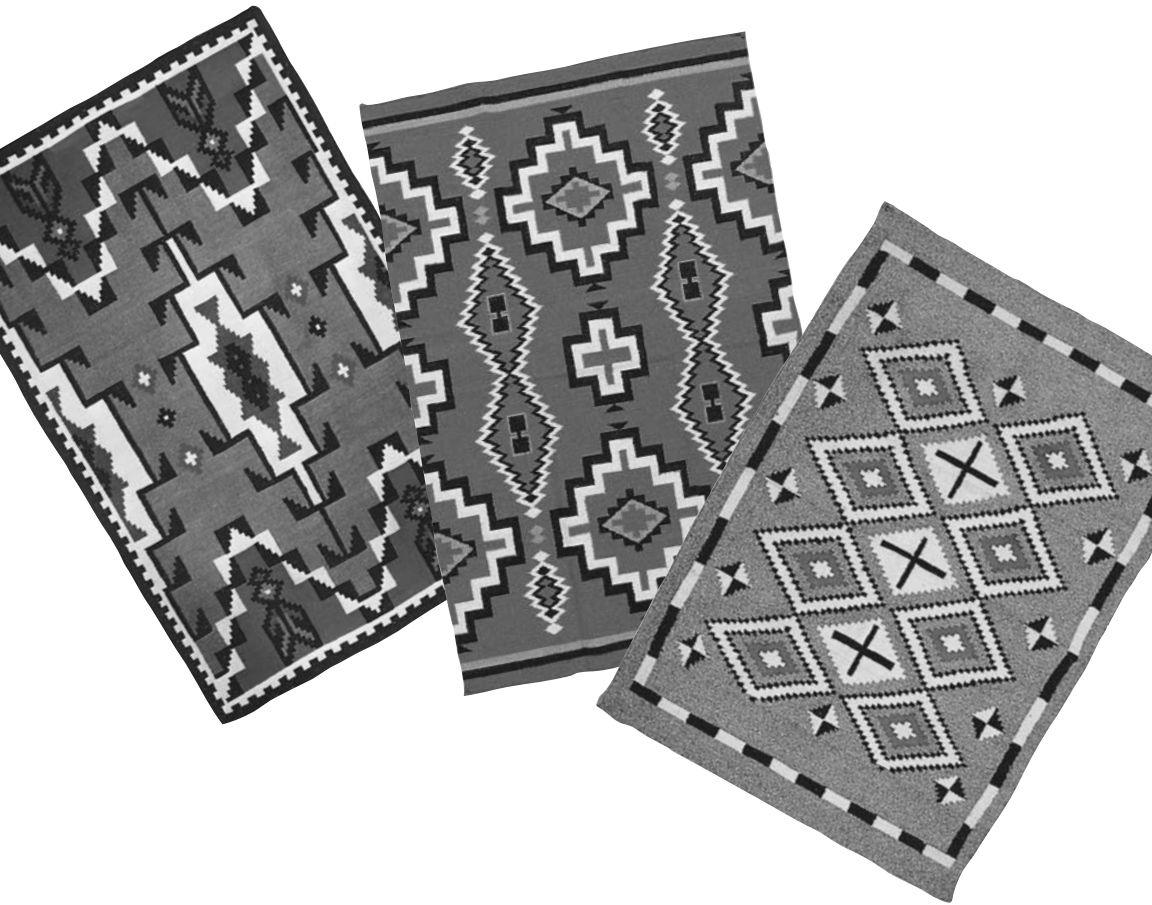




# PART 2

## *The Business Partnership*

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## Chapter Seven

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# Tying the Knot

*“Life with Dusty hasn’t always been easy,  
but I guarantee you, it’s never been dull,”*

—BONNIE HENSON



THE GOOD-LOOKING WOMAN who came into the Old West Hotel in the summer of 1974 was a school-teacher from Iowa. She was doing advertising work for a development in Pagosa Springs, which was just across Wolf Creek Pass from the Old West Hotel. Bonnie came into the hotel and asked me if I’d let her put cards advertising the Pagosa real estate development in every hotel room. The deal was that if someone went to listen to their pitch, they’d get a free round of golf, or a camera or some other prize. I was hesitant until Bonnie explained that she would give me \$75 up-front to put the cards in the hotel, and \$75 for each hotel customer that made a purchase. It was a deal I couldn’t refuse. Little did Bonnie or I realize that it would be the first of thousands of deals we would work together as man and wife and founders of El Paso Saddleblanket Company.

Bonnie can probably tell you best in her own words about how her life changed when we got together. *“Some people daydream about escaping their day-to-day routines and running away with the circus. I didn’t need this*

*fantasy—from the time I met Dusty Henson, life became a three-ring event. Having been a somewhat introverted elementary school teacher, my life took an irreversible turn when I took up with a wild and crazy gypsy trader.*

*“Seeing the Old West Hotel for the first time gave me some insight into the business personality of a twenty-nine-year-old bachelor named Dusty Henson. I thought the billboard down the road probably exaggerated when it boasted ‘Over 100,000 Items.’ Well, that turned out to be a modest understatement. The shops were packed with merchandise, floor to ceiling. Every conceivable inch of wall space or support column was plastered with Old West memorabilia. There were even items hanging from the ceiling.*

*“Everything was so accessible, so inviting. I am sure every kid blew his entire vacation allowance at the Old West Hotel. This was the absolute, ultimate tourist trap. Most everything was reasonably priced and “3 for \$5” and “5 for \$7.50” signs encouraged quantity purchases. My old desire to be in marketing rekindled, and I was eager to get to know the mind behind this operation.”*

BONNIE FINISHED UP her business with the development company in the fall of 1974. Or the business finished with her. At any rate, she was out of work, and I was ready to hit the road. I asked Bonnie, “I’m going to Mexico. Would you like to come along?”

Bonnie said, “Sure.” It was an easy decision. A new owner had just bought the real estate company she was working for and had fired everyone. She didn’t have a job, so she didn’t have anything to lose. Mexico sounded great.

That was in 1974, and we’ve been together ever since. For us, marriage has meant much more than a honeymoon. It’s meant building a life together, and we have built a life together through our business.

BONNIE’S CHILDHOOD was a lot different than mine. I’ll let her tell her story for herself.

*“About the same age that Dusty was wheeling and dealing sno-cones, I was helping a neighbor lady sell Tupperware in a small town in Iowa. My role in the*

*Tupperware party was two-fold. First, I demonstrated how to make homemade popsicles using the Tupperware freezer set and explained the savings over the store-bought kind. Then I demonstrated the special technique of closing the food storage containers so as to make them air-tight.*

*“The thrill of the sale did not capture me as it did Dusty. I just hoped my future career would be something more challenging than showing people how to burp their Tupperware.”*

Bonnie went from burping Tupperware to flipping hamburgers.

*“While working at Dalton’s Dairy Queen in Glenwood, Iowa, I overheard the owners debating whether or not they could survive the hamburger wars. The competition was selling hamburgers six for a dollar. I suggested that rather than arguing, they should sit down and put a pencil to the problem. ‘How?’ they asked. The next day I charted out the cost for one unit item (meat, bun, condiments, overhead, etc.) It was a close call, but we figured that if we could sell a sundae, or at least of couple of ice cream cones, with each hamburger purchase it would work. The sale began. It was a success. I was offered the position of assistant manager but I had just been accepted to the University of Iowa and off I went.*

*“Direct sales didn’t interest me, although advertising and marketing did. As hard as I tried to pursue that major, I failed—not so much academically as socially. In the 1960s the MBA program was very much a fraternity. So I got a degree in elementary education and became a school teacher for a few years. Then I went to Colorado, got a real estate license, met Dusty, and we headed to Mexico.”*

ON MY THIRTIETH BIRTHDAY, September 26, 1974, we packed up my Chevy Impala and left Colorado for Mexico. We headed to San Miguel de Allende where we met a fellow, and I started dealing a bunch of his jewelry. After that, we went to Querétaro, one hundred miles north of Mexico City, where we bought some turquoise and a bunch of opal, mostly fire opals. I was convinced that fire opal was the next thing. We took the opals to Guadalajara to have them set in silver. It was a good trip, and we found some great antiques and Spanish colonial religious paintings to market along with the Mexican jewelry. While I was busy making deals, Bonnie was having her first experiences as an international traveler.

*“When we first arrived in Mexico, my ability to speak Spanish was not much more than ‘dos tacos por favor.’ I knew at least that I wouldn’t starve. But a dilemma arose when I ran out of clean clothes. I took Dusty with me to the hotel desk and had him ask in Spanish, ‘Where do people go to wash their clothes?’ Dusty got an answer and we started walking. After following the directions ‘tres cuadros y vuelta a la izquierda’ (three blocks, turn left), we found to our surprise not a laundromat, but the river where a dozen women were cheerfully pounding their laundry on the rocks. Sometimes, even when you understand the words the answer isn’t quite what you expect.”*

WE TOOK THE MERCHANDISE we bought in Mexico and began traveling back and forth from our home base in El Paso to sell our goods in New Mexico, Arizona and southern Colorado. We began to meet a lot of good folks who had saddle shops, tourist curio stores and Indian trading posts. We sold our jewelry and other products and lived the life of gypsy traders. It was a cash only business, and we made lots of cash. Bonnie was shocked at first by the change in her lifestyle.

*“As a young woman, I never could have imagined the fast paced life of a trader travelling to the far ends of the earth. When Dusty started El Paso Saddleblanket Company, it was little more than a one-horse operation. Well, let’s say one-pick-up truck operation. Though the hours were long, it was a great lifestyle with no phone and no boss to answer to.”*

The main challenge Bonnie and I faced as a team was learning how to trust one another. I had to learn how to trust Bonnie’s quiet, analytical perspective on problems. She had to learn how to trust my West Texas instincts. Slowly, we learned how to work together: a semi-outlaw border trader and a quiet midwestern schoolteacher.

*“When we got together, my life took a very unusual turn. All my strict daily routine, conscientious budgeting, and well-organized plans were turned upside down as we gypsied through Mexico and the Indian Reservations of the Southwest.*

*“Finally, when I started to grasp what trading was all about, I realized that I could learn a lot about advertising and marketing from Dusty and that he could use some of my organizational skills. Thus, out of chaos came a great union.*

*Not only a business partnership but a marriage.*

*“In business Dusty is the runaway locomotive full of ideas and enthusiasm. He often complains that I am the brakeman. What most would call a train wreck is actually a finely-tuned, well-maintained business machine that operates out of cooperation and endless discussion.*

*“My family was a little concerned when I quit teaching and took off with Dusty. It’s not that trading was foreign to them. In fact, my father’s father was quite a wheeler-dealer in the early 1900s. They owned a huge farming operation, the local grain elevator, and the stock yards in a small, southwest Iowa town. Five children out of eight went off to college in high fashion wearing coonskin coats and driving their own Model T Fords. Unfortunately, the Depression wiped out all their holdings in 1929-1933. Some of my conservatism stems from this family experience.”*

BONNIE AND I had fun buying and selling all kinds of things, until we found the one product on which we could build a steady, on-going business. That product was the Mexican, handwoven, Southwest-style rug.