

## Chapter Nine

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# Guatemala

*“In some weaving areas, I had whole villages in remote Guatemala, entire towns, working. I take a lot of pride in that fact, not that anybody would be starving without El Paso Saddleblanket Company, but I think that some people are eating and living a little bit better.”*



**J**UST WHEN OUR BUSINESS was really taking off, we hit a snag. We couldn't get our beautiful new rugs out of Mexico. The administration of Mexican President Escheveria was decidedly anti-American and anti-trade. Importing from Mexico became almost impossible. Just when we had discovered the perfect product, our source was cut off. We had to find new weavers in a new country as fast as possible. That country was Guatemala.

Traveling has always been a major part of what it takes to run El Paso Saddleblanket Company. But the year we spent in Guatemala—from January to December, 1977—was the longest time we lived continuously outside of the U.S. Years later, Bonnie wrote down the story of our Guatemala experience. It was a pretty wild time.

*“Visiting Guatemala for the first time in 1976 was not a pleasure trip securely planned and packaged by Grayline Tours. We were on a mission of grave financial interest. Because it had become so very difficult to do business in Mexico*

*under the rule of President Escheveria, we were searching for a country to move to for the purpose of entirely relocating our weaving operation. We knew that Guatemala had weavers. What we didn't realize at first was how far out in the boondocks and up in the mountains the skilled artisans lived.*

*"It was necessary to carry small change of the local currency. Going to a bank to cash some traveler's checks was not quite as easy as you would have thought. The lobby was full of people standing in slow-moving lines. Every transaction was done with a manual adding machine (not electric...the big old clunky kind) and before any money changed hands it took the rubber stamp of three or four people.*

*"Finally reaching a teller, we were told we were in the wrong line. Somewhat frustrated, but without profanity, we silently threw up our hands in useless anger, knowing the only thing we could do was go to the other line and wait again. But as I gestured, I also lifted my eyes to something I hadn't noticed before. I nearly fainted dead away when I saw on the mezzanine above no less than ten soldiers pointing AK-47s at the bank lobby.*

*"Dusty had to prop me up and calm me down. It took me a while to understand that the soldiers were there for our benefit...that Guatemala was under military rule, and unsurprisingly, they never have bank robberies.*

*"Even though the presence of armed soldiers throughout the city disturbed me, I learned later to accept the rationale. We learned to use the military for protection of our house, our business, and in our payroll trips to the Indian villages high in the mountains."*

GOING FROM EL PASO, TEXAS TO GUATEMALA doesn't look so impossible in an atlas. It was just a matter of going from point A to point B. Right? We thought making the decision to go was the hard part. Wrong! The fun and futility had only just begun. Being young and in love and still somewhat naive, we boldly pushed onward. We liquidated our inventory, and sold off our truck and travel trailer, to raise as much capital as possible. Bonnie tells the rest of the story.

*"Not everything in our inventory sold for cash. We ended-up taking about \$50,000 worth of trade items. Some of this was components to make Indian jewelry and the rest was a starting inventory and franchise rights to the Argenion*

*water purifier business for Central America. The weaving business turned out to be only one of a dozen or more things we would get involved in during our stay in Guatemala.*

BONNIE STILL HAD some serious reservations about moving to Guatemala. I knew she was concerned about our personal safety, as well as the loneliness of being an expatriate. So I promised to buy her a German shepherd puppy. As Bonnie wrote, she was thrilled with the idea.

*“December 1976, Phoenix, Arizona. We were in the Michigan Trailer Park reading the classified ads in the newspaper. An ad jumps out at me: ‘XTRA LARGE German shepherd puppies for sale.’ That sounded like just what I needed as my protector for our foreign travels. That day we brought home this massive ball of fur and paws, only eight weeks old but all I could carry. We named him Sid.*

*“Just days later, we completed selling off all our extra stuff and headed for Guatemala in a Ford Econoline van. We left the trailer park just in time because we were about to get kicked out. It seems Sid had been leaving his doodoo on the neighbor’s marigolds. In Arizona, in old folks’ trailer parks, they don’t permit children, pets or any disruptive behavior. Disruptive or not, Sid became part of our family. Even though Sid is no longer with us, German shepherds are still very much a part of our family. In fact, we now have four of them. But more dog stories later.”*

BEFORE WE LEFT THE UNITED STATES, we drove through Abilene, Texas, to say good-bye to my family. Randy Bruner, my brother-in-law, helped customize our Ford van so that we could hide some items that might be a problem going through customs inspections. A false bottom of a bunk bed became the hiding place for all the liquid silver jewelry components. I thought it was a pretty good set up, but, as Bonnie explains, it wasn’t all that good.

*“Everything rode very well until we were three days into Mexico. A junky old truck had a tire blowout right in front of us and Dusty had to hit the brakes*

*HARD and brought the van to a screeching, swerving stop. Everything from the back of the van crashed forward, filling the small open space reserved for Sid. Thank God Sid was OK. But in the crashing stop some of the packages of silver had broken. The van looked like some kind of cheap Christmas ornament. We had little bits of silver everywhere. It was impossible to clean it all up, and the next morning we had to cross over the border into Guatemala.*

*“When we pulled into the inspection station the guards were not friendly. They had been humiliated because, when they threw back the van’s side door, they were terrified of little old Sid. I was told to take the dog ‘over there’ and stay out of the way.*

*“I got very nervous that the inspectors would confiscate our television and all our electrical appliances. Dusty started speaking Spanish to them and distributed all the beer we had left in the cooler. After completing their inspection they still had not found anything to get ‘mordida’—literally a bite, a bribe—so they claimed we needed another permit to transport the dog into the country. \$20, a rubber stamp, and a sigh of relief later, we were on the last leg of the trip into Guatemala City.”*

VERY SOON, we rented a house that came with two Indian maids from the mountains. We set up business, hired employees, and were producing all kinds of products for export. I always like to move forward quickly and decisively.

We traveled into the mountains to set up our weaving operations. It really forced us to improve our Spanish even though the textile weavers in the highlands spoke mostly Mayan Indian dialects. Spanish was their second language, but somehow we managed.

I brought some samples up to the village of San Francisco el Alto and spoke with the weavers there. We agreed on the price, and they agreed to have two hundred rugs ready on a certain date. I was back in the saddleblanket business and man, was I thrilled!

I called up Maxie Ortega and all my clients in the U.S. and said, “Hey, I’ve got good production down in Guatemala.” And I sent them pictures and received a stack of orders. When the time came to pick up the order, I headed back up to the village, cash in hand, escorted by two soldiers

with AK-47s. I asked where my rugs were and they pointed to a small pile. Instead of the two hundred rugs I was expecting, the weavers had produced only nine. My heart sank. The weavers explained that they had been planting corn, celebrating holidays and doing other things. I was shocked to learn that their priorities were so different from mine. What could have been a lucrative business, and would have been, turned out to be a bust.

I SAID TO MYSELF, “OK, if weaving blankets isn’t our mainstay, let’s move on to Plan B.” Only problem was, we didn’t have a Plan B. But we immediately went into an almost frantic production of other things that were more in our control, as Bonnie recalls.

*“Everyday our dining room was filled with young ladies stringing jewelry. Surely these brightly colored necklaces would sell well here in Guatemala. We had these little bird fetishes from Taiwan, and we must have strung up ten or twelve thousand of those necklaces and sold them all over Guatemala. I supervised this while Dusty hired people to sell water purifiers. There was a definite need for this product and sales were going well until one day we received a registered letter, very official looking with stamps all over it, from someone in El Salvador.*

*“Before I explain the significance of the letter, let me say that in Central America most businesses run as monopolies. One family controls all the beer, one family controls all the cement for construction and so on. It’s OK to be in business, just don’t cut in on someone who’s already staked their claim. People were known to disappear or be found with their throats slit.*

*“The man from El Salvador claimed in a very formal declaration that he had rights to all the Argenion water purifier sales in Central America, and that we had the choice of either turning over all our inventory and sales to him, or pay a hefty commission to him for every unit.*

*“Did Dusty get upset? No way. He called the President of Argenion in the United States and found that the guy in El Salvador wasn’t any bigger than us. So, Dusty told his secretary to write a fuck you letter back to the man in El Salvador (in diplomatic Spanish of course) and we went on about our business.*



BUSINESS WASN'T our only headache. As Bonnie can tell you, keeping a house in Guatemala was also a challenge.

*“Since women were not well accepted in business in Latin American countries, I stayed at home more than I liked. Getting used to having maids was a real strain. And maids were necessary. It’s not like home in the States. You can’t do your own vacuuming because there’s no wall to wall carpet. You can’t do your own laundry because there aren’t any washing machines. You can’t shop for a week’s groceries because of poor refrigeration—everything spoils in two to three days. So I learned that things must be done daily by maids with manual labor, over and over and over.*

*“At first, dealing with the maids was an exasperating experience for me. Spanish was a second language for them as well as me. The Indians speak their own Mayan dialects. Our first real language dilemma came about when I asked them what supplies they needed for cleaning the house. Escoba—broom, trapos—rags. Hey, we’re doing great! Then came the word ‘a-hocks.’ This was not in the dictionary. We went through a game of charades trying to determine what ‘a-hocks’ was used for. The word turned out to be AJAX!! Everything in Guatemala is cleaned and scrubbed with Ajax. They use it for so many things you almost had to remind them no, it’s NOT for washing my clothes, PREFERABLY not for dishes and by ALL means, not for washing the dog!*

*“Another little problem with Spanish, the day a truck driver came banging on the gate demanding ‘flete.’ That means freight. OK, no problem, something was arriving freight collect. But the guy showed me a bill for one hundred Quetzales, and demanded payment before he’d unload the cargo. When I questioned how big it was he said, ‘Mmm, possibly five hundred kilos.’ What in the world could we have ordered that weighed over one thousand pounds?*

*“By this time Dusty arrived and the driver vented his frustration in shouting, ‘Mira señor, yo no puedo bajar su vaca sin paga.’ Dusty laughed, said a few words in Spanish and the truck drove away. What was the cargo? A COW! The driver had the wrong address! Good thing, the landlord didn’t even much like our dog. He sure would have hated a cow in our yard.”*



WE TRIED EVERYTHING we could think of to make money in Guatemala. We tried selling hooked rugs from the village of San Antonio, and pottery from San Cristóbal Totonicapán. The production of hook rugs fell off when a bridge collapsed and the weavers couldn't get materials. Pottery didn't do well because there was a flood up north. The water purifier business was slow because people had so little money to spend. We had sold all the silver fetish necklaces, and looked around for something else to sell.

I noticed that there were a lot of hummingbirds around our house, and I remembered the hummingbird feeders from Fun Valley and the red food the hummingbirds liked to drink. "Man," I thought, "those hummingbird feeders will sell here in Guatemala!"

I had Meyer Goldberg, a friend of mine in Denver, send me a few cases of the hummingbird feeders. We set some up on our porch and filled them full of that red liquid and waited. And waited. And waited. Those hummingbirds down there wouldn't go near the feeders. To this day, I don't know why.

Finally we decided to leave Guatemala. Why? It was pure economics. Our monthly expenses were more than our business income. The bright star that kept our spirits up was the fact that Mexico had just elected a new President. We knew we could start over in the saddleblanket business.

So long Guatemala, so long *Negocios Guatejas*. That was the name of our Guatemalan corporation. It was meant to translate Guatemala-Texas Trading Company. What we didn't realize was that in Guatemala *tejas* meant the heavy red roof tiles on their homes. To us *tejas* meant Texas and home. It was good to get back, and we became El Paso Saddleblanket soon after our return from Guatemala.