

Chapter Eight

The New Navajo Rug

“I’m a trader not a collector.”



WE WERE MOSTLY still focusing on jewelry when we stumbled into something that would change our business forever. It was just a routine trip across the river to restock some silver from a wholesaler named Mauricio in Juárez.

Mauricio was a classic border character. He was a Jewish trader whose family had emigrated from Poland to Mexico. Mauricio was into a little bit of everything. He liked to sit at the front of his shop next to an ice chest, filled with soda for kids, and beer for adults. He spoke English in a deep, husky voice with a thick Polish/Spanish accent.

“Dusty,” he growled when he saw me. “Dusty, come in. I have something for you.”

Well, I’d gotten to know Mauricio back when I ran the Old West Hotel. I’d bought some jewelry from him and his brother, Julio. But when I went down to visit him this time, Mauricio had a new item he wanted me to see. “Dusty,” he said. “Look at these blankets my brother Julio’s making.”

I studied them carefully. They were more tightly woven and more intricate than the old Casa Zia saddleblankets I had been selling for years.

These were a new style of rugs and saddleblankets with designs revived from old Navajo rugs. Julio had even put out a brochure. The photo on the cover of the brochure was completely fake (some Native American weavers standing at an old, vertical loom), and some of the color combinations were hideous. But the saddleblankets and rugs were sturdy and affordable. "You can sell a lot of these," Mauricio said. We thought so too. We could see the potential and we figured the small details could be worked out later.

He was right. Today, we are still selling saddleblankets and rugs that have designs very similar to the ones I first saw more than thirty-five years ago.

WE STARTED OUT selling our new products out of our pick-up to Indian traders, and pawn shops on the reservations: the clients we had gotten to know in the jewelry business. The Indian trading posts were owned by several families, like the Tanners (an old Mormon family) and the Ortegas.

One of the trading post operators we met was Maxie Ortega of St. Joseph, Arizona on Route 66, just west of Gallup, New Mexico. Maxie had been trading Navajo rugs for decades, and took a close look at our Mexican made saddleblankets and rugs. Maxie liked what he saw, but he had a lot of suggestions. He told us which colors to use for which rugs. He showed us how to make the corners flat and which rugs needed a border and which rugs didn't need a border. He told us about the Spirit Line, the Tree of Life and other traditional designs. Maxie was the one who really helped us take the Mexican-made saddleblankets and rugs and redesign them for the American consumer market. We were so pleased with his suggestions and his enthusiasm that we always stopped to see him, giving him first pick of every new load of merchandise.

IN THE SUMMER MONTHS we focused more on New Mexico. All winter we had coached the Mexican weavers on colors and designs that we thought would go over well in Albuquerque and Santa Fe.

One Friday, we headed across the border, picked up the rugs, finished the necessary documentation, and crossed the rugs through customs into El Paso. Then we took off up the highway and arrived at Santa Fe in the wee hours of the morning.

We had run a small classified ad in the *New Mexican*, a Santa Fe newspaper and sent out some very simple post cards inviting the tourist shop, western store and trading post owners to see our “new” weavings at the Ramada Inn on Cerrillos Road in Santa Fe starting at noon on Saturday.

We got up, put the mattress up against the wall, unloaded our rugs and blankets, and set up a display in our hotel room.

Then we waited. And waited. It was so slow that we even sold a family of tourists from New Jersey or somewhere a couple of rugs. Then one guy showed up and bought a very small order. Then one other guy called, asked a couple of questions and said he might get back later. THAT WAS IT. A HUGE DISAPPOINTMENT!!!

On the way back to El Paso, we sold some stuff to some Santo Domingo Indians at their pueblo and sold some more rugs in Old Town Albuquerque to Manny Goodman at the Covered Wagon Trading Post on the plaza. Despite our disappointment, Bonnie and I talked things over and decided to give Santa Fe one more shot the following Saturday.

The next Friday there was a long line at the international bridge and the customs agents were not too speedy. Finally, we cleared customs, then took off on the long six-hour drive to Santa Fe. We damn near flipped the load dodging a coyote at Truth or Consequences, New Mexico. Anyway, as we were checking into the Ramada Inn, the night clerk said, “Are you the folks with those Meskin’ rugs?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Hey, the phone has been ringing off the wall for you.”

“OK, OK. Good Night...,” I said.

8 A.M. Saturday. Bang! Bang! At the door our first customer with a \$600 sale. Not bad, considering the show didn’t open until noon. 11 A.M.—another customer and another pretty good sale. Noon—five or six more customers showed up, and they kept showing up all day long. By the end of the day we’d sold out, but I was still giving out my just-printed business

cards and TRYING to act calm and cool! We sold out EVERYTHING! Even some odd lot Taxco silver jewelry and a couple Mexican saddles were gone.

It was amazing. The first weekend, nothing. The second weekend a sellout. We didn't know what caused our good fortune, but we didn't care. We had introduced a product that we truly believed in, and it was a great seller.

We later found out that the week after our first Santa Fe show, the owner of New Mexico's "premier snob gallery" wrote this long "do-gooder" letter to the editor of the *New Mexican* warning store owners and everyone about these "new" rugs from Mexico which were made so well that they compared to the authentic high-priced Navajo rugs. The gallery owner was trying to stop people from buying our rugs, but, instead, gave our product some of the best publicity it had ever had. I felt so indebted to the guy that I mailed him an anonymous Christmas card that year that included a crisp hundred dollar bill. He later found out who sent the Christmas card and, in the end, we all had a good laugh over it. Later, I even called on him to try and sell him some rugs. He never bought any, but we became pretty good friends through the years.

I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN FASCINATED by the history of handwoven textiles. Nomads in the Middle East started handweaving more than a thousand years ago, and the craft has almost always been a commercial endeavor. Thus, there is little recorded as to the origin of designs. Generally, traders have greatly influenced the patterns, color, and quality control of the world's handweaving. From the earliest experimentation with lines and angles, weavers have continually adapted and absorbed ideas from other cultures to upgrade the craft and increase the marketability of their handwoven product.

In the New World, between 1800 and 1900, Navajo Indians learned handweaving techniques from the Spanish and the Pueblo Indians. Until the late 1800s, the products the Navajos made were simple blankets for wearing and Chief's blankets that were traded to the Plains Indians. What

people think of as Navajo-design rugs were designed mostly by early territorial traders using ideas from photographs of Persian carpets mixed with Pre-Columbian architectural designs from the Mitla ruins in Mexico. By combining these design features with sheep's wool, imported dyes, and some entrepreneurial spirit, Navajo weavers began to produce a marketable product. Today, the finest Navajo rugs are extremely expensive.

As traders, we continue to perform an important role in the evolution of handweaving. We are constantly working to create handwoven items of quality, economy, and above all, something the consumer feels good about acquiring. We continue to reintroduce popular old patterns in exciting new design combinations, new sizes and new colors.

Some folks have criticized us by saying that our Navajo-style hand weavings are not traditional enough. These folks don't know what they're talking about. For one thing, we have always, always been proud to say that the weavings we sell are produced in Mexico. For another thing, the manufacture of hand weavings has always depended on market demand as interpreted by traders. This has been true throughout history, and it is still true today. So, if customers demand hunter green, burgundy or cream colors, we are always willing to bend the rules of traditional red, black and white, and give them what they want. For nearly forty years, El Paso Saddleblanket has proudly specialized in quality handweaving mostly from Indians in Mexico. For some products, we have contracted the artistic skills of weavers in Guatemala, Ecuador and India.

I'm not a collector. I'm a trader. I've always been more concerned about something selling than being authentic. It's like cars. Some collectors will say, that's got a twelve volt battery, the real ones only have six. The first thing I do when I get an old car is to put in a twelve volt battery. The same is true with the Indian rugs and saddleblankets. If I think a traditional rug design will sell better if the red is a little brighter, I'll make it brighter. Most customers want quality and good-looking design. They don't care about strict authenticity. Certainly most Native Americans don't care. Some of our biggest clients now are the Indian casinos. They want merchandise that moves.

We will continue to modify our designs and contract with skilled

weavers from around the world to respond to market changes and to bring our customers the highest quality Southwestern-style hand weavings at the lowest possible price. That has been the philosophy behind handweaving since the dawn of civilization, and it continues to be our philosophy at El Paso Saddleblanket.