

El Paso Saddleblanket: The Greatest Trading Post in Texas

By Bill Crawford: Austin, Tx

"See 200,000 Rugs." "Two Acre Trading Post", "Wholesale Accounts Welcome."

All across the southwest, screaming yellow and red billboards lure mesmerized travelers to one of the greatest roadside attractions in Texas, the El Paso Saddleblanket World Headquarters.

Wandering through the two building complex just off I-10, the road warrior encounters a three acre southwestern wholesale/ retail extravaganza. Sixty cases filled with silver/turquoise jewelry. Walls of necklaces. Mountains of Persian, Oriental and southwest style wool rugs. Scorpion paperweights. Racks of Cowboy and Cowgirl Boots. Saddles. Furniture. Iron Work. Pottery. Baskets. Freeze dried Rattlesnake. Arrowheads. Buffalo hides. Even cowboy style caskets. It truly is the World's Largest Southwestern Trading Post.

Dusty Henson, the 67-year-old king of this eccentric empire, sits in his memorabilia filled office behind a battered, note-covered desk. With a knowing grin, a Texas twang, and graying hair down to his shoulders, Dusty is a rangy operator in jeans and a Hawaiian shirt who has been cutting deals for half a century. "Take a look at this," he says holding up a bully bag, a cowhide container made from a bull's scrotum. "The Germans and Japanese buy pretty much all these we can produce."

Behind a smaller, more organized desk, sits Bonnie Henson, Dusty's wife and co-conspirator. Sid and Sadie, her beloved German shepherds, rest comfortable in cages by her side.

"Bonnie's the brains of the outfit," Dusty brags. "I'm just the bullshit marketing guy."

As Dusty launches into a story about trading in Mexico, Bonnie looks on with a demure smile and perhaps a touch of embarrassment. After all she's

been dealing with the back pounding, wildman Dusty Henson for nearly forty years.

The Henson's fit right into El Paso, the crusty border town that has attracted empire builders, revolutionaries, bootleggers, smugglers and fortune seekers of every description for more than four hundred years. Today, El Paso and her sister city, Juarez, Mexico have a combined population of over two million and form the world's largest urban area on a bilingual border. Even with the drug war raging in Juarez, the two cities still provide a major transit point for the \$314 billion in annual trade between Mexico and the U.S. In this city built on trade, Dusty and Bonnie occupy a unique position as El Paso's best known deal making outlaws.

"Even today folks in town are uncomfortable when people ask them too many personal questions," observes Dusty, whose office sits just about a mile from the legendary pass (El Paso) between the Rocky Mountains and the beginning of the Sierra Madre. "We have a higher tolerance for characters than the rest of Texas."

Dusty comes from a family of characters. His father, Mack Henson of Abilene, Texas was a movie & theater actor, a Las Vegas Gambler, and a successful entrepreneur who founded the 3,000 guests Fun Valley Resort and RV Park in South Fork Colorado.

"Old Mack was the one who inspired me to get into trading," Dusty explains. "I guess it's in my genes."

At age ten, Dusty started making money, peddling snow cones and ten cent rides on his pet donkey. At age 14, he operated the Fun Valley Commercial trout pond, selling anglers their catch for ten cents per inch. "I can still clean a trout in less than 7 seconds that's my claim to fame" He sold worms, tackle, small pine trees, wild roses, and even live chipmunks.

Dusty attended North Texas State University in 1963, but spent most of his time pursuing money making extracurricular activities. When he wasn't bootlegging beer, he was publishing a Who's Who for college students, at

least until he ran afoul of the U.S. Postal Service. In 1966, he joined the Army Reserves and was stationed at Fort Bliss in El Paso. Dusty fell in love with the borderland hustles and the illicit pleasures of Juarez.

Two years later, with Mack's help, Dusty set up his first trading post at the Old West Hotel in Del Norte, Colo. Dusty and his father transformed the run down property built in 1872 into a gaudy western themed tourist attraction, stuffed with Mexican imports and Native American arts. Always the hustler, Dusty spent summers in Colorado and winters in El Paso where he ran a number of other businesses, including even selling a \$1.00 mail order pamphlet entitled "The Truth about Mexican Dentures".

One day a slim, good-looking woman appeared at the store promoting a real estate development. "I was a former school teacher from Iowa," the future Bonnie Henson explained. "I never dreamed of going into the circus or anything. But when Dusty said, "Do you want to go to Mexico?" I said "Sure," and my life has been a circus ever since."

They closed the Old West Trading Post and became full time gypsy warriors selling imports and jewelry to stores and dealers throughout the southwest. Looking for a trademark product for their business, they hired six weavers in Juarez to make hand woven copies of Navajo rugs and high quality saddleblankets. The products were an instant success, and El Paso Saddleblanket was born.

When Dusty and Bonnie jumped into the booming market for southwestern turquoise jewelry, and their business skyrocketed almost overnight. They sold blankets and jewelry to trading posts, dealers and Native Americans on the various reservations and pueblos. They were literally selling Navajo styled rugs to Navajos. Even today, the Henson's continue to trade with many of these early wholesale clients.

Things were going great, until problems with Mexican export regulations got in the way. "Mexico business can either be the best, most fun time you've ever had or an absolute nightmare." Dusty recalls. "It's usually a little bit of both."

Dusty and Bonnie headed further south. They moved to Guatemala where they set up a weaving and a pottery manufacturing operation in the highlands near San Francisco el Alto. They had a great year, but couldn't make enough products to break even, and headed back to the U.S. in search of more lucrative trading operations.

In 1982, the road led them to Scottsdale, Arizona, where they got into the wholesale gold jewelry business with a guy Dusty describes as "a fun loving wildman." "I think our ex-partner wound up trading arms in Russia, but who knows?"

After a brief but lucrative stay, they headed back to the border and establish their business in a 6,000 square foot store/warehouse in South El Paso. "It was right next to a methadone clinic and a half-way house. There were hookers, pimps and smugglers everywhere. Just my kind of scene."

They focused on selling exclusively wholesale to small business owners. Dusty expanded his manufacturing operations sending literally tons of wool carpet yarn end rolls and creel outs from mills in Georgia and Carolinas to be transformed into southwestern style rugs in Mexico. He expanded his marketing efforts as well, with a toll free number, his first billboards, and about a half a million catalogues distributed every year.

Dusty realized early on that successful trading was not about finding and importing. "The key to the business is that it's 90% selling and 10% buying. Any fool can buy and eventually get a decent price, but the real trick is to sell."

The Henson's moved their operation to a 36,000 sq. ft. warehouse outlet in downtown El Paso that served at their headquarters for the next eighteen years.

For the next 3 or 4 years, they traveled the world buying and selling. Central & South America, Europe, Africa and Asia. Australia. (about 50 different countries...) plus 15 or 20 annual trips to Mexico. The downtown location ran over with merchandise, and both the wholesale and retail business exploded.

As their store became an El Paso institution, Dusty and Bonnie managed to maintain a down-home, friendly feeling to the operation that has been

their trademark to this day. And Dusty seized the opportunity to practice his philosophy that "Anything worth doing is worth OVERDOING."

The Henson's collected Cadillacs, sixteen of them, one or more of each year from 1949 to 1961. They bought an early 1900's mansion where they threw lavish parties for hundreds of guest whom Bonnie entertained playing her grand piano. They donated generously to political and civic causes. "Life was good," Dusty recalls. "So good that it began to make us nervous."

To get away from the craziness of American politics (or maybe to add to their own personal craziness) they bought a ranch along the Santa Isabel River and moved to Chihuahua, Mexico. Named Ranch El Cid, in honor of their German shepherd, the ranch, which was a five-hour drive south of El Paso, soon became a business hub for the area.

The Henson's secured government grants to train local artisans. They built a weaving factory with sixty hand looms, a foundry making a range products in cast aluminum and iron, and a cattle horn furniture making operation with horns imported directly to the ranch from Africa. They set up a weaving factory and a Katchina doll factory in neighboring towns. Every Tuesday and Wednesday, local traders cashed in pick up truckloads of horseshoes, branding irons and other ranch antiques.

By 1994, the Henson's had about 150 full time employees, as well as a soccer team, and baseball team. They hosted rodeos and even an International Trade show. To celebrate the event, and his fiftieth birthday, Dusty jumped on the back of a bull, strengthened with several shots of liquid courage.

Bonnie especially liked living out on the ranch, which reminded her of growing up on the family farm. "I rode horses and started a petting zoo with a baby Brahma bull, a bighorn sheep, fifty rabbits, six goats, chickens and, Dusty's favorite, the donkeys. The ranch years were the best years of our lives. It was like this big wonderful dream."

Try as they might, even experienced traders like the Henson's couldn't make money at Rancho El Cid. They reluctantly closed their operation and moved back to El Paso in 1999.

"We decided to make some changes in our lifestyle and business," Dusty explained. "We'd been on the run non-stop for twenty-five years." They limited their sales at their downtown store to wholesale customers only, cut back on their hours, and bought a weekend getaway property in the artist village of Hillsboro, New Mexico.

But even as they tried to settle down, trading took them back on the road to Mexico, South America, China, India, Morocco, Turkey & the Phillipines.

"I've always been a trader not a collector," Dusty observes. "I just couldn't stop growing the business."

In 2005, they closed their downtown store, bought a former bowling alley and began building what was to become "The El Paso Saddleblanket World Headquarters."

"We jumped back into retail and it was a big success from day one."

They hired Dusty's cousin, Annapolis graduate, Marine Captain and Iraq veteran Luc Henson Wells to be the new General Manager. "When most people would be slowing down," Luc says shaking his head, "Dusty and Bonnie are speeding up."

In 2007 they acquired a saddle workshop in Chihuahua City and another in Monterey and combined the two to form Casa Zia Saddlery. They expanded their manufacturing operations to India, where they produced a full line of southwest style bed spreads, pillows, mats, blankets and hand-woven purses as well as more than 50,000 hand chipped arrowheads per month. They even began exporting Indian made Saltillo serapes to Mexico.

Dusty, Bonnie and Cousin Luc continue to expand their trading post product line. They partnered with local builder Jack Winton to start building custom El Paso Saddleblanket brand homes. In that same year, they worked an arrangement with the Jauquin Padilla family in Leon, Mexico to distribute their legendary Montana Boots in the US. "Our Boot business is the fastest growing and probably has the most potential" says David Cobos, head boot honcho.

They created the Home Collection Outlet featuring Mexican ranch furniture, iron work and home decorative items produced at a new Juarez

furniture factory. The Juarez factory also makes Western Cowboy style caskets for the Henson venture "The Last Rodeo Casket Co."

Dusty recalls, "We were honored when our friend, the Chief of the Tigua Indian Tribe, was buried in our hand tooled leather decorated "Bound For Glory" model casket."

Like the original southwest trading posts, El Paso Saddleblanket World Headquarters has become a focus for community events. Every October, the Henson's host The Dog Lovers Fair and the Spanish & Indian market. Every Saturday the Trading post hosts Native American pottery making demonstrations, Humane Society Dog Adoptions and music by pal, Guitar Slim. Art Shows, book signings, chili cook offs, Kinky Friedman Cigar Party, the Great Southwest Book Fair and mega-media events attract crowds who never know quite what to expect at the World's Largest Trading Post.

For Dusty and Bonnie, who have no kids and no hobbies, El Paso Saddleblanket is much more than a business. It's their home. Dusty likes meeting people, designing new products, trading, buying and SELLING. Bonnie uses the store to further her work as a devoted supporter of animal shelters and dog causes. "We got our first German shepherd, Sid, in 1975, and I have been raising dogs ever since. Pets are always welcome in our store, and every Saturday we host a dog adoption day."

Of the thirty-six employees at El Paso Saddleblanket World Headquarters, seven have been with the company for more than twenty years, and fifteen have worked there for more than ten years. Dusty jokingly says "Hell, I can't fire anyone cause they all know too much".

As El Paso Saddleblanket has grown, so has the city of El Paso. Making his way to his favorite table in the fashionable Cafe Central restaurant, Dusty in boots and jeans slips the maître de a twenty, and says hello to all the local royalty. It's obvious from the reaction that everyone in town

respects Henson's contribution to the community and his success in a brutally tough business. "Trade is the oldest form of human communication," says the master deal maker. "It's a noble profession."

Pick up some Mexican pottery, a western placemat, or a Navajo styled rug in Santa Fe, Phoenix or Denver and more than likely it's from Dusty and Bennie's domain. El Paso Saddleblanket has probably done more to define the southwestern style for the middle range consumer than any other business. Dusty and Bonnie remain committed to customers who are starting out on their own, perhaps from the back of a pick-up truck. "We still sell mostly to small operators, " Dusty says, sitting on a big stack of his Persian Rugs. "There's nothing like giving folks the opportunity to own their own business and experience the American dream."