Chapter Eighteen

Rancho El Cid

"Anything worth doing is worth overdoing."

In the early 1990s, American politics got a little too crazy for Bonnie and me. We felt like we couldn't operate any more without getting sued. El Paso had become the center for a large number of sleazy lawyers known as "sewing lawyers" for all the suits they filed against local clothing manufacturers. In 1992, for example, one out of every four of the workers at a major El Paso clothing manufacturer was collecting workman's compensation but not working. The company was going broke trying to operate in El Paso, and we didn't want to be the next victim.

With nearly fifty employees and hundreds of retail customers in and out every day, we felt vulnerable both because of lawsuits and because of government overregulation. We figured if the government was going to tax us to death and dictate every detail of running our business, why not move? And when Hillary Clinton's husband was elected president in 1992, that was it for us. Bonnie and I were both convinced that the country was in an immediate tailspin in the hands of left-wing socialist radicals. We wanted to keep the business going because it was extremely

lucrative at that time but, at the same time, we wanted to keep an eye on the back door. So we decided to move to Mexico and start our business south of the border.

It wasn't only that we wanted to get away from the lawyers, politicians, and the anti-business climate in the U.S. By this time, we felt like we were losing a little of our identity in the marketplace. We really needed to get back in touch with Mexico and to give our business a public relations boost.

We also saw Mexico on the rise and America on the decline. Mexico seemed to me a place where a person could live much more by the code of the West, with the freedom to trade and do business. The economy in the Mexican state of Chihuahua, the state just south of El Paso, was booming. NAFTA was building consumers and a thriving middle class in Mexico. We realized that Mexicans had enough disposable income to eventually become important customers and that Chihuahua City was a great emerging market for El Paso Saddleblanket.

We explored the state of Chihuahua, looking for a place to settle. About 230 miles south of El Paso and about thirty-five miles west of Chihuahua City, we found the little town of Santa Isabel. It was a nice, clean, quiet town of about two hundred people. The town is built on a big freshwater spring. In the summer, the town even had a water park with swimming pools and slides that drew visitors from Chihuahua City.

Just outside of Santa Isabel on the Santa Isabel River, Bonnie and I found a place that seemed perfect. It was a large spread with an eighty-year-old ranch house, a lake and a year-round flowing river. It was called Rancho Casa Blanca. We bought the place and renamed it Rancho El Cid, in honor of our new German shepherd puppy, Sid II, or El Cid.

Of course, buying a ranch in Mexico wasn't that easy. It took long, drawn out negotiations, but we finally sealed the deal. Then the work really began. The adobe walls of the old ranch house were still standing. Some of them were about two feet thick. The old roof beams were still

there, but about half the roof was completely caved in. There was a little bit of the roof over the kitchen and the wood stove. Our first job was to rebuild the old ranch house so that we would have a place to live.

We hired a contractor to oversee construction, a Mexican-American named Mario Cobos. He was a construction guy, pretty smart and a good country boy from Marfa, Texas. Mario was fluent in Spanish and English and had done a lot of work on our house in El Paso. We got a cement mixer and a bunch of other equipment, and things went pretty well building up the place. Mario got along real well with all the local people and began to hire folks to work. He was a fighter and kind of a hell raiser, a macho guy who could get respect.

The roof on our ranch house was really funky. The people who had owned the place had put a little dirt on the top of it and a little tar each year to seal the leaks. So it was basically a tin roof with about six to eight inches of dirt and tar on it. Right next door to the ranch, some Franciscan fathers were building a *capilla*, a monument and a church dedicated to a local folk hero, Padre Maldonado. The fathers at the church needed fill dirt and we needed to haul the dirt from the roof somewhere, so we started giving the dirt to them. The fathers called it the first miracle of the *capilla*. I thought it was more of a lucky coincidence, but I had to respect their beliefs.

We wanted to get to know the people in the local area, so we donated some sacks of cement to the local school. Later I brought down a bunch of equipment for the school that a private school in El Paso had donated —desks, lamps, even old computers that had never been taken from the box. We brought down sacks full of baseball hats and T-shirts with the El Paso Saddleblanket logo on them. Mario rode his horse all over town throwing hats and shirts out to the kids and everyone else he saw. The local people got to know about us pretty quick.

It didn't take long until we knew Paco Chavez, the mayor of Santa Isabel. Shortly afterwards I invited him to El Paso and introduced him to Suzie Azar, who was the mayor of El Paso. Then he invited the mayor of El Paso to come down to Santa Isabel. Santa Isabel threw a party for Mayor Azar. Mayor Chavez even told her she could land her private

plane on the highway if she wanted. The mayor of Santa Isabel was on cloud nine. He was a politician and glad to make contacts across the border. We had no problem borrowing the public city equipment from time to time for private work down on the ranch, and he became a staunch supporter of El Cid.

Soon we knew the judge, the tax collector, the local police, the city council people, the merchants and the other folks in town. It was only natural. We were the biggest employer in Santa Isabel when we had six guys working a cement mixer. Eventually, we had two hundred employees working for us in and around Santa Isabel.

Our little town actually had two names: General Trias, Chihuahua, named for a military hero, and Santa Isabel, Chihuahua. For some reason, a few Mexican towns have two names, but the local folks prefer Santa Isabel.

About three hundred people live in and around Santa Isabel. The town itself consists of *centro*, the central district, with about fifteen various businesses, and about ten *barrios*, neighborhoods. Our ranch was about a half-mile down a dirt road from centro and adjoined the Boquilla barrio, which consisted of about twenty houses. Boquilla referred to the mouth of the river, since both our ranch and the barrio were on a river. Many of the same families had lived in the same barrios for generations, and each barrio had its share of characters and its own identity. For example, the Ranchito barrio across the river from us had the reputation of being the lazy barrio, while our barrio was known for the small gang of tough country cousins from the Macias family. We hired them, and they became some of our best weavers. They proudly called themselves The El Cid Army.

Our barrio was also known for Doña Julia. She was a bootlegger and ran an operation where everybody could buy beer and tequila after hours. Old cowboys tied their horses out front and hung out at her cantina, which was also her living room. She was born in that house about seventy-five years before. She was known to gossip and became our insider on what was going on in Santa Isabel.

We were proud of the fact that Mayor Paco Chavez of Santa Isabel praised our operation in his annual state-of-the-city address. He noted the fact that we hired a mix of people from various barrios, which allowed folks to mix and get to know each other better. Some of these groups had had long-running feuds, like the Hatfields and McCoys, before they came to work at Rancho El Cid.

ONE OF THE GREAT THINGS about the ranch was that it was only a forty-minute drive from Chihuahua City, a city with McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, movie theaters, great restaurants, night clubs, cowboy beer bars and all the other comforts of home. Chihuahua City, population 600,000, was just as clean or cleaner than El Paso.

Throughout that first year we were having a blast building our facility. We built stables and cleared pastures and we entertained. Boy, did we ever entertain. It's hard for Americans to understand just how much land means to the Mexican people. Being a *don*, a landowner, and a landowner who was creating jobs, put us on a high social plane, not only in Santa Isabel but in Chihuahua City as well.

Instead of a barbecue pit, Mexicans cook out on something they call a *disco*. It's actually a plow disc with three legs that is placed over the fire and cooks in the same way as a wok. You put meat on the disco along with onions, potatoes, tomatoes, and jalapeños, and place tortillas around the edges. If the disco gets too hot, you move it from the fire. It's a great way to cook. You just grab what you want from the disco and wrap it in a flour tortilla. There are no dishes to wash. We later manufactured discos at El Cid and exported them to the U.S.

Parties in Santa Isabel are usually guy parties. The guys get together with the other guys to drink, eat and sing songs. The women kind of stay home. This was a bit of a social problem for us, because Bonnie couldn't be a big part of things, but we managed.

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A LITTLE BIT ABOUT JUSTICE in Santa Isabel. I always liked the way the local police handled things. It was a lot like justice in the Old West. If you caught a person breaking into your home, it was expected that you would shoot them. If someone was caught stealing livestock, they were in big-time trouble, believe me.

Getting services in Santa Isabel was more difficult than making friends. It took us two years to get a telephone, and I paid through the nose for that. We ran on city water which ran out about two o'clock in the afternoon. Electricity went on and off. We ran on propane, which was tough to get. As difficult as it was to set up the ranch, I never paid a bribe to the local police or anyone else in Santa Isabel. I was just flat stubborn that way. Whenever I was faced with a situation, I told the fellows, "You know, I'm a friend. I'm here creating jobs for Santa Isabel. I am really sorry that we have a misunderstanding, but I'm sure that we can work everything out if we take our time and go to court." They always understood.

THE CHARACTERS IN SANTA ISABEL also made it seem like the Old West. One old cowboy hung around town. Everyone called him *Tío Viejo*, Old Uncle. He was too proud to beg, but he used to stand on the street, staring down at five or six pesos in his hand. He'd stand there and mumble to himself, "If I just had a few more pesos, I could get to Chihuahua…" So when folks passed by they just dropped a couple of pesos in his hand.

Then there was a lady who looked like an old witch and lived up in an abandoned house in a little canyon near the Boquilla. She was probably fifty or so, and she was always running around looking for her daughter. The strange thing was, she actually didn't have any daughters. But at one time she was said to be one of the most beautiful, sophisticated young ladies in this town. She had never been married. She never had any children. Her boyfriend disappeared, and she went crazy. Everyone knew her in the village. When she came into town, everyone would say, "Come on, come on over here," and they'd give her a few pesos or tortillas or some food.

Peddlers came down the road all the time selling things—milk,

vegetables, motor oil, even furniture on the installment plan. All kinds of other characters dropped by the ranch: photographers, evangelists, Tarahumara Indians walking up and down the river and even saddle tramps, old broke down cowboys on horseback with their bedrolls, looking for ranch work. It was just like the Old West.

WHEN I STARTED TALKING about the idea of building a manufacturing facility, the Chihuahua state government went out of its way to help me. Bonnie and I both received official FM3 Mexican passports and immigrant status in Mexico. We set up a Mexican company, El Paso Saddleblanket De Mexico, S. A. de C.V. And we got started setting up a centralized production base and a training facility for apprentices to learn the business. We constructed our first warehouse, a dormitory and an apartment house. Mario started hiring some people to train as weavers.

Our operation had a big impact on Santa Isabel.

The government helped us out any way they could. They helped set up training programs and even tried to start a program to reintroduce sheep to the area to provide wool for weaving. We imported top quality wool from the carpet mills in Georgia and South Carolina and set up phase one—sixty first-class metal looms, which had never been set up before in Mexico. Phase two eventually brought in an additional sixty looms. They were specially designed by Mario to use spring action, something we had never seen before. We trained the workers at the ranch to handweave the top quality wool into top quality saddleblankets. We brought in *maestros*, master weavers from Oaxaca, Saltillo and Guanajuato, to teach. We got government grants to help with the program and tons of great press in the Chihuahua newspapers.

A weaving operation isn't a simple thing to set up. In addition to hiring weavers, we hired people to make the warp (the set of yarns placed lengthwise in the loom). We hired people to put the warps on the loom. We hired people to take the finished rugs off the loom, and we contracted with people to finish the weaving, to sew tags on the rugs and pack them. It was a big operation.

The weaving didn't go all that smoothly. The people of Chihuahua are farmers and ranchers who have little experience making handicrafts. One day we had a walkout. One of the weavers didn't get what she wanted and they all walked out. We kind of faced them down. "Fine," I told them. "We can get more weavers." We gave them a chance to save face and they came back. We never had any more trouble after that.

After some time, I realized that I was not particularly good at manufacturing. You have to be pretty hard-minded and efficient to be a manufacturer. I'm not a detail man. I like working from my instincts and not from my balance sheet. As we looked over our operations in Santa Isabel, we realized that the money was just not right. Our expenses were too high, and our prices were too low.

After two years of weaving and not making money, we looked around for other opportunities. We opened up a couple of satellite weaving operations in the nearby villages of Satavo and Riva Palacio. We set up a kachina doll factory in El Charco. We created a small factory on Rancho El Cid for making rustic horseshoe hangers and plaques. We had people making ladders, cleaning cow skulls, making *bully bags* (bags made out of bull scrotums) and constructing slingshots. At one time, we had about two hundred people working for us. We were the biggest employers in Santa Isabel by far. And unlike other Mexican companies, we were paying good wages and conducting all our business above board. It was a tough struggle to make it work.

ALTHOUGH BUSINESS WAS TOUGH, we still had a good time. We had our own El Cid soccer and baseball teams that competed with teams from other barrios and neighboring towns. The police soccer team usually won. We held horse races down by the river. On the day of the race, a huge crowd showed up. Our horse Chepe (short for Chihuahua Pacific locomotive) raced against Bolivar, the fastest horse in Santa Isabel. We lost.

Our barrio, Boquilla, consisted of many small houses on one or two acres of land. Most of the folks in our barrio raised a few animals and grew corn, beans and kept a vegetable garden. A river that was fed by

mountain springs ran through our neighborhood. A dirt road led from the neighborhood to the centro, about a half mile away.

I noticed that this dirt road was getting kind of trashed out with beer cans and paper and plastic bags stuck in the trees and bushes. A few weeks before, I'd been visiting at Lake Chapala near Guadalajara. The lake had been choked with plants, so the citizens started a program and hired young teenagers to clean up the lake and the roads in the area. Work four hours, earn $5. That was the deal. The program worked like a charm. It was good for the kids, it cleaned up the lake, and it gave the community a sense of pride. I decided to start a program like this in our barrio. I called it *Dia del Orgullo*—Boquilla Pride Day. We talked with the local priests and told them that we would hire about twenty teenagers to clean up the river. We offered $5 and a free lunch. The fathers agreed to help spread the word. We told them that the kids should meet us at 9 A.M. We figured maybe a couple dozen kids would show up, and we'd all have a good time cleaning up the river and the dirt road to the ranch.

Well, Pride Day came around. I woke up and noticed a big crowd next door at the *capilla*. "Hmmm," I thought. "Somebody must be getting married." Then as the morning went on, the crowd kept getting bigger and bigger. By 9 A.M., there were several hundred people gathered, and I was in a panic. All those people had shown up to help with Boquilla Pride Day! Being a savvy politician, Mayor Chavez had even jumped on the Pride Day bandwagon. He had sent out the city workers, the entire police force and the city's only garbage truck.

I told the fathers, "Look, there's no way I can pay all these people."

They said, "We know, we know. They have just come to volunteer."

OK. They all didn't have to be paid, but I knew that everyone had to be fed. So we started the crowd off cleaning the river, then we went into Santa Isabel. Man, we bought every scrap of food in town and brought it back to the ranch. By the end of the afternoon, the river and the road were beautifully clean, and everyone was eating a great lunch, cooked outside on our discos. The whole thing worked out great. Pride Day is now an annual event in Boquilla—the second Saturday in October every year.

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"Rancho El Cid allowed me to have a second childhood," Bonnie recalled. "Riding big, fast horses, playing with my dogs, gardening—it was the first country living I had done since growing up on the farm in Iowa. My petting zoo was a big hit with visitors—especially when the employees from El Paso brought their kids. We had a baby Brahma bull, a bighorn sheep, fifty rabbits, six goats, chickens and Dusty's favorite pets—the donkeys.

"Cooking outside was great too. Dusty's experience working at his Dad's resort helped me turn cooking for two into cooking for a crowd. We had some great barbecues. Our Chihuahua City friends loved to come out for a weekend getaway. We had three guest houses for visitors and entertained our family, Senator Rosson, Pete Duarte (the head of Thomason Hospital in El Paso) and other good friends.

"It was a fun and chaotic environment, especially on the second and fourth Friday when I would cook lunch for the staff of more than 150. I introduced them to Sloppy Joes, American-style Thanksgiving turkey and real El Paso-style Mexican food which was even hotter than they were used to in Mexico. It was hard work but I always loved life at the ranch."

One of the best times we had at the ranch was the time we hosted a trade mission called Vecinos 2000. Through the El Paso Hispanic Chamber of Commerce we invited a hundred El Paso business people. Working with Fomento Economico we invited three hundred Mexican business people. My friend Senator Rosson and a large group of El Paso politicians and business people attended, as well as other dignitaries including our new friends Enrique C. Terraza, Chihuahua director of economic promotions, and Mayor Chavez of Santa Isabel.

Everyone got along great. We had discussions, food and sixty booths set up to show products. We even held a Mexican-style rodeo. There were *charros* as far as you could see in white hats, talking, laughing, drinking and watching the events. One of my favorite events was the *coladera*. In this event, the charro grabs a steer by the tail and twists it until he brings the steer down. It's kind of like bulldogging, but from the rear end.

The fiesta wasn't held just for trade. It was my fiftieth birthday party as well. I was feeling pretty good, and I decided that I would celebrate my birthday by riding a bull. Everyone, including Bonnie, was astounded to see me climb on the back of that two thousand pound critter. But I did it. It wasn't the longest ride in the world. In fact, it was one of the shortest. But everyone, especially the Santa Isabel locals, loved it.

IN 1996 AND 1997, we started having problems getting yarn and struggled to find new businesses for our workers. We set up a small foundry to make cast iron bells, outdoor furniture, branding irons and other products from recycled motor blocks. We had never been in the foundry business before. We soon realized that is was tricky, expensive and dangerous. Bonnie couldn't stand to watch our workers as they poured the fiery, molten metal into the molds. It was so dangerous. We finally gave up the foundry because we realized that we could buy the same objects at a good price from our Mennonite neighbors in Chihuahua who knew what they were doing.

We started another business, buying up Mexican cowboy antiques. I put the word out to all the locals that we would be buying antiques three mornings a week: Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. I was amazed to see the line of trucks bringing in merchandise from the bush. We expanded our search for antiques and hired kids in Chihuahua City to hand out lists of things we wanted with set prices and to tell people *"Americano compra, Americano compra…"* American buying, American buying. And we *were* buying—wagon wheels, canteens, saddles, spurs, branding irons, chaps and horseshoes.

We were buying so much that I hired pickers to work for me. They took kids from Chihuahua City and drove them to the little villages in the countryside. The kids circled through the village, knocking on doors and telling people to bring what they wanted to sell to the town plaza. I was paying good prices. I paid more that I needed to because I wanted the supply and I didn't want anyone competing against me. One of my best customers was the Brinker restaurant chain in Dallas. Brinker owns

a number of famous restaurant chains including Chili's. They used the ranch antiques as decoration in their restaurants. At one point, I was doing $20,000 worth of business a month with Brinker alone.

Even when you're buying and selling old horseshoes and milk cans, you can get into trouble with customs. One of our container loads of antiques got stopped at the border. The drug dogs went absolutely nuts. The authorities searched the whole container, looking for drugs. What did they find instead? A cat had crawled into an old stove and had died in there. The dogs had smelled the dead cat and had gone ballistic.

We did so well in the antique business that we cleaned out the area. There was nothing left to buy or sell! Again, we had to look for other ways of making money. We tried to sell into the Mexican market and established an exclusive line of antiques, art, jewelry, saddleblankets, saddles and other leather goods. We got the exclusive rights to distribute Circle-Y saddlery into Mexico. We also hoped to become a distribution center for U.S. goods, but the business never took off.

AFTER THE WEAVING, antiques, metal foundry and a dozen other ideas didn't pan out, we decided to set up a *maquila*, or factory, for making horn furniture. I'd bought horns for years from a trader in Central Texas, Willie Dudly. The owner was about to retire so I said, "I'll buy your horn polishing equipment and we'll start doing it in Mexico."

I had plans for doing horns in a big way—mounted horns, furniture made of horns, a whole variety of home furnishings made of horn. I talked up the project with everyone in Chihuahua and told them that this was going to be the deal that saved our operation. The state government agreed to help us out.

I had the equipment. Now all I needed was the horns. I was buying horns by the crate from an importer in Houston, but I found a much better source for horns in Nigeria, Africa. So I ordered a container of horns shipped from Nigeria to Houston, then trucked to El Paso. We were all set to bring the horns into Chihuahua when we ran into a problem with Mexican federal customs.

Federal Mexican customs asked, "Where are these horns from?" Nigeria. "Nigeria?" Mexico had no trade relations or any other types of relations with Nigeria. So it was impossible for Mexican customs to allow the importation of Nigerian cattle horns into the country.

I was really upset. I called my friends in the Chihuahua state government, "Hey, I need to get these horns down there and customs is giving me problems…"

My buddies said, "OK, we'll try to get it fixed…"

"All right. You better."

A week went by and I called up again. "When are you gonna get me my horns?"

"We're gonna get it cleared pretty soon…"

After a whole month went by, I called up and gave them hell. "Dammit! No wonder Mexico can't do anything! Here you've got somebody waiting with money in hand, jobs for your country, and there's a bunch of government assholes holding up progress. No wonder this is such a backward country." I was redneckin' like a sonofabitch, but I was furious. My whole operation was on hold.

A few days later, my buddy in the Chihuahua state government called me back. "OK. It's done."

What I had failed to realize was how much work my friends in Chihuahua City had done to get me my horns. After my first phone call, they had contacted the Nigerian embassy in Washington and had exchanged agreements. Then Mexico had sent a trade representative to Nigeria, and Nigeria had sent a trade representative to Mexico. The two countries had set up cultural relationships and trade relationships and had produced a manual an inch-and-a-half thick which had been ratified by the Mexican Congress—all in a thirty-day period. I felt like an A-1 prize asshole for carrying on so much. Can you imagine how long a thing like that would have taken in the U.S.? And can you imagine how much it would have cost in terms of lobbyists and political donations? But I was proud of the fact that my little horn factory had brought two nations together.

We polished the horns and made good-looking furniture upholstered

with Brazilian cowhides. We even used the horn dust to fertilize the pastures at the ranch. But there was one big problem with the horn business. After we were in operation for about six months, I calculated that I had a three-year supply of horn products. And that was being optimistic. We tried to develop a market within Mexico. But it didn't really work.

Probably in about 1997 we knew it wasn't going to be successful. Business was changing, markets were different. Sometimes you go with your heart rather than your business instincts and this was certainly true in our case. There was no one to blame in this case, not the Mexican Government, not the employees and not ourselves. I can say that we did everything proper, honorably and legal. We paid full social security, insurance and benefits to our employees. Many companies in Mexico do not and sometimes it's hard to compete with others when you play by all the rules. It was not our wishes to close the factories or sell the ranch, but we knew it was what we needed to do since by then we could see there was "no light at the end of the tunnel."

AT THE SAME TIME that we were having troubles in Mexico, our operations in El Paso were hurting as well. 1997 was a bad year for our business. Our income was down about a third of what it had been in 1995. We were unable to make El Cid profitable or break even. Setting up the facility at Rancho El Cid was an amazing adventure but eventually reality set in.

The constant El Cid worries were taking their toll on us, as was the traveling. Normally we drove down to the ranch on Saturday of one week, spent a week at the ranch, then drove back to El Paso and spent a week back up here. Bonnie had back problems and oftentimes had to fly back and forth from the ranch. The constant traveling back and forth was particularly tough on her.

After five years, the ranch was nowhere near self-sufficient. We had tried our best, but as any business person knows there comes a time when you have to cut your losses to survive. It was an exciting project

and rewarding. We would not have traded the experience for anything, but we decided that if El Paso Saddleblanket was going to prosper, we had to sell out in Chihuahua and move our operations back north to our weaving factory in Juárez.

We sold Rancho El Cid—or as we fondly called it "The Cash Guzzler"—in 1999 to Mr. Miguel Cerezcerez, a Santa Isabel local who had lived in Los Angeles for the last twenty years. He had done well in the wrought iron business and wanted to come back home to Mexico.

Selling the ranch was not a fast or easy deal. It was hard work. We made a cash sale on the ranch. 1999 turned out to be a very interesting year all around. We had been trimming down for about a year and by mid-1999 we had a skeleton crew of only about eight employees. It had been expensive to pay the severance and other departure costs of the employees. We sold some of the ranch equipment and the horses to our local rancher friends. We sold the foundry equipment, the tractor, vehicles and tools. I gave our donkey herd to the Kachina doll makers in El Chaco when we closed the factory there. We had closed the Chimayo weaving factory in San Andres in 1998 and moved the looms back to El Cid. Next were the 120 or so weaving looms at the ranch. It was sad to see all our hard work and dreams vanishing little by little.

Even though the weaving factory was not successful, mostly due to the high cost of production, I still had the determination and a dream of seeing this part of Chihuahua become a weaving center much like Oaxaca and Jalisco. I knew I had successfully taken a bunch of cowboys in Santa Isabel and transformed some of them into pretty good artists on the loom. We already had some trained weavers, plenty of looms, yarn, and most of all, El Paso Saddleblanket Company was the largest importer and manufacturer of Mexican artesania in the world, which would provide a natural outlet for the production.

I could not bear to see all the work and energy we had put into this project be wasted. There had to be a different way to do it other than in a factory production setting. It would have been smarter to walk off at this point, but I guess I just had something to prove. I became obsessed with planting that little seed that would grow into this HUGE miracle of

a success story that would provide hundreds of jobs, introduce sheep again to the area for their wool and on and on. It was not about money at this point. It was a point of pride, maybe stubborn pride on my part. I have to admit, I don't give in to failure easily. Maybe it was ego, maybe it would vindicate the whole weaving factory failure. Other villages in Mexico did it. Things had to start somewhere. There are pottery making villages; wood carving, weaving, leather making, basket making and jewelry making villages. Why couldn't we make our area into a great weaving area?

I called on our friends from the Chihuahua Economic Development Office once again to help us salvage what we could and hopefully establish a weaving center in Chihuahua. I proposed a loose partnership between El Paso Saddleblanket and the Chihuahua state government to open four small weaving co-ops in Santa Isabel and three more in other villages that they could choose. We agreed on the philosophy that the government was there to help the people however possible and not to make a profit. El Paso Saddleblanket would help set up the factories and handle the marketing worldwide. One thing I knew for sure by now was that we were much better at marketing than manufacturing. We agreed that we would donate the looms for Santa Isabel; the state would purchase looms for the other villages and buy our remaining yarn. El Paso Saddleblanket would do all the future purchasing of yarn for a twenty percent fee and also buy all the weaving production from the co-ops that met our quality standards. Each village could locate their factory in a building or have weavers work from their homes, cottage industry style. Our friends in the state government knew us very well by now and quickly agreed to the plan.

We moved the looms and set up the mostly cottage industries with record speed. I bought and shipped a truck load of wool yarn from two carpet mills in Dalton, Georgia. Experienced weavers from Santa Isabel were sent to the three other villages. Two of the villages were very remote. One had only gasoline generators for electrical power. I completed our part of the agreement and turned it over to the state.

Things started going downhill fast. It was an election year so the

politicians in Chihuahua City turned things over to the local *presidentes* (mayors). Training money was handed out like candy, products and yarn began to vanish, ghost payrolls appeared and on and on.

Within a few months everything imploded, some of the metal looms were disassembled and used for gates and on doors around the villages. It was horrible. I was devastated and absolutely helpless to do anything except watch everything self destruct. It was very disappointing and I suppose I could have gone into some type of deep depression.

But what the hell! I was now back full-time in El Paso, business was really picking up, I was doing more at the Juárez factory and we had a bunch of new products and samples being made overseas. Things were looking up! 1999 was coming to an end and…

A NEW MILLENNIUM was just around the corner!

OUR COMPANY was doing better than ever financially. And we still kept in close touch with all the friends we made in Chihuahua while we were operating Rancho El Cid.

Even though it was a financial failure from the beginning to the end, I consider Rancho El Cid one of our biggest accomplishments. I have never had as much fun, problems, excitement, worries, adventure, pride and disappointments as I did in those years from 1993 to 1999. Mexico is a beautiful land, but you soon figure out that the customs and the rules are very different. Especially in the countryside, life is gritty and raw. Things we consider normal and routine can not be taken for granted. It is not a place for a weak stomach and in time it will harden you. There is a fine art to living and working there. There is a tough macho mentality yet compassion and honor rules. One must be careful not to let people mistake your kindness for weakness. Land owners (the employers) are expected to maintain certain traditions and responsibilities. The worker mentality tends to be more socialistic. Domestic abuse, alcoholism and animal abuse are common. Many Mexicans do not have the means to feed their families.

Life is hard for many people and yet we had to accept the fact that we

could not be all things to all people. We learned their ways and were accepted and respected in the community because we were always honest, hardworking people and respected people's families and their culture. It is impossible for me to describe all my feelings about Santa Isabel, Chihuahua, Mexico.

I felt a deep relief when we left Santa Isabel. But at the same time I felt a true pride of accomplishment for what we did in those six years at El Cid. To this day I still dream of El Cid at night and reflect back everyday on our friends and the crazy things we did down there. It's been many years now, but somehow a part of Bonnie and I will always be in Santa Isabel. We still keep in touch and go back from time to time. It's beautiful.