

Durango, Colorado

Somewhere, I suppose it must have been in one of the old movies, I had gotten the idea that Durango was a town of corrals and railroad yards with thousands of cattle waiting to be shipped off to Omaha and Chicago. If this is so, we didn't see them. What we saw was a tourist town of fun and games relying heavily on the ski trade. The ski season being nearly over, we had no trouble checking in to the General Palmer Hotel downtown rather than in one of the fifty motels on the strip to the north. In the summer, I imagine that these motels are booked solid because Durango is the southern terminus of one of the most spectacular drives in the whole of the United States: Route 550, south from Ridgeway, passing through Ouray and Silverton, ex- (or possibly revitalized) mining towns. The road goes

Dc 2

over two passes at 11,000 feet.

Just as tourists reconstructions in New England are dedicated to the proposition that life was at its sweetest in the period 1770-1830, tourist Durango is fixated in the 1880's, the time of the swinging door saloon, the assay office, and the cheerful House of Pleasure. In two of the leading Durango hotels the decor is red plush, late General Grant antimacassar, complete with pot-bellied stoves, overstuffed chandeliers , and walnut sideboards hauled from Italy of such incredible size , that it makes it pretty clear how big our ancestors of the "Public Be Damned " Period were thinking. How the present lies about the past!

We had arranged to meet Reuben and Phyllis in Durango. They told us that Durango was the best place to buy Indian jewel^{ry} and rugs since it is the largest town nearest to the Navaho country. Phyllis knew the name of a dealer with whom she had done some business and thought she might get us a discount. We set out for the Yebetchai Trading Post and it turned out to be just around the corner from where we were staying. We found one of the best collections of Indian rugs we had ever seen. Our eyes popped, we went ga-ga and eventually bought one for twice what we thought

De 3

to pay originally, even with a dealers' discount. But as they say, it was worth it.

A Navaho rug may come in all sizes, from about 12 by 18 inches to six by nine feet. The price is not necessarily keyed to the size; it depends upon size plus quality, design, execution, materials, etc. One of the very large rugs may cost from ten to fifteen thousand dollars. A genuine Navaho rug is hand woven on native looms. The wool is shorn from sheep that the tribes raise. It is washed, dyed and spun for rug making. The trading post displays a chart showing typical native plants that yield different color dyes. We were amused to notice that red-purple is often obtained from onion skins.

If one thinks of the whole process from the sheep to the finished product displayed on the wall, and thinks of the months of labor on the part of the women, then a few thousand dollars, say she gets 40%, is not that much.

Jim Anderson is the name of the young man who runs the Trading Post. His father started it. He takes pride in the authenticity of his rugs. Each rug comes with the name and address of the weaver and a Polaroid color shot of the weaver holding up her work.

Dc4

He also writes out a certificate of authenticity.

As with every product, there are imitations and short cuts at every stage and it takes a while to learn what to look for.

As we were about to leave with our rug and certificate of authenticity, the door opened and a number of Navahos with rugs to sell came in. Here was authenticity indeed. Jim Anderson told us to wait for a while and see what would happen. He spoke a kind of pidgin Navaho. He joshed around for a while with the men in a condescending fashion, and made the women laugh who otherwise had the most impenetrable faces I have ever seen.

Then the bargaining process began. Each rug was laid on the floor one by one and haggled over. The Navahos are said to be sharp traders. After about ten minutes, prices were agreed on for all the rugs, and Jim whipped out his Polaroid and photographed the weavers holding their rugs. His assistant wrote out checks and a round of Seven Ups was brought in for one and all.

It then occurred to Jim that the rug we had bought had been woven by the daughter of a man and woman who had just brought in some more rugs for sale and

Dc5

that I might like to meet them. (I wish every salesman knew his product the way Jim did.) We shook hands and since Jim still had his Polaroid out I suggested that he might take a picture of weaver and buyer together. Jim was game as was the woman with a slight amount of persuasion, and that is how I happen to have been photographed with a Navaho lady.

The next day we headed north to Silverton and from there back to Salt Lake.

