

*“The road to success is always under construction.”*

The highway was changing and great lengths of Interstate 40 were beginning to appear. The rest was still in the planning stage. Route 66 would eventually disappear as the main street of the southwest, replaced by the interstate highway with exits at interchanges. A new era was beginning, and I wanted to be part of it. Besides, Hopi House was running smoothly, and it was time for me to strike out on my own again. I probably had all of \$1,500. And I was already 29 or 30 years old. I couldn't wait any longer.

I took Linda and the kids back to Lupton, where I leased some reservation land from a Navajo resident, John Tin Smith, at an interchange where Interstate 40 was coming through. It was about 500 yards from Dad's store. Red Lake had left me with one asset, my Indian Trader's license. I needed it to go into business at this reservation location. And it felt good to be back in Lupton. I had come full circle. Now I needed to make something happen.

We rented a tiny three-room block house. It was painted pink and had a turquoise door and sat on a dusty spot within walking distance to Dad's store. We squeezed in and settled into our new home. But, we had to make the living room into a bedroom. Nothing much had changed in Lupton —except for all the pickup trucks everybody drove. Linda did a good job of “highway homemaking,” and the kids went to school in Sanders.

While Lupton felt comfortable, familiar and safe, the new super highway coming through spelled “opportunity.” All my instincts and senses were tuned to the possibilities which that interchange held for me. I got to work immediately.

With the \$1,500 I had saved from the Hopi House, I bought cinder block and some 3rd-grade lumber from the sawmill at Navajo. I envisioned the store in my head and traced the rectangular outline into the dirt with a large stick, so the entrance would face the traffic exiting the highway. I needed a work crew. My brother Denny was in college at ASU, but Carl Kempton, my brother Dewey, and Freddie Slatten were all there to help so we could begin construction. Carl had just returned from three years in the Army with even more skills — and he was an eager worker.

At a glance, Carl inventoried the building supplies, then shook his head in disapproval.

“Gilbert, we don't have enough block,” he huffed, pointing to the stacks of block.

“What do you mean, Carl?”

“Well, look. There's no way we can build the store with this. We need more materials.”

“I don't have money for more block, Carl.”

I shoved my hands in my jean pockets and stomped across the store layout on the ground, looked at the block, looked at the perimeter of the would-be store. I paced in silence for several minutes. The others just stood there. It was imperative that this store be built with what we had. And we couldn't afford to waste any time either. There was no way to create more money or more cinder block. Suddenly I had it, and snapped my fingers.

“We just have to cut corners. We'll build a triangular store.”

Well, they just stared at me like I was crazy, like I was a regular “Frank Lloyd Wrong.”



“Stores don’t have to have four sides. Hogans have eight.”

I snatched the stick and literally cut corners in the earthen diagram. The widest portion still faced the interchange.

I figured if we built wooden teepees at each corner, it would look like it was intentional — not like a triangular trading post, but an Indian Village. And that’s what I called it, Indian Village. The Fawlettes built a Chevron station at the same time, so that solved the need for gasoline.



The building went up in no time — cutting corners helped to speed up construction. Many of our Navajo neighbors who saw us at work offered to pitch in. “Oh, I’ll help you, Gilbert,” each would say. We were all the best of friends and they would help us with anything.

Even James Goodluck, showed up with one of his philosophical comments. “The road to success is always under construction,” he chimed. Boy, was he right.

Maxie built a restaurant next to the store — customers entered through the teepee at the back corner. That filled another need, another attraction. Later, we had family parties and dances there sometimes.

I hired Albert Lewis, a local Navajo artist, to paint colorful figures and designs on the store and on the wooden teepees, too. So, Indian Village was brightly painted, and the teepees at each corner were very effective.

We also built the teepees out of that 3rd-grade lumber. Since the cheap wood had big knot holes, we hammered pieces of tin cans into the gaps, and Albert managed to paint over our patches just fine.

Next I had him make the highway signs. They were extremely important. For the EXIT sign, he insisted on using a ruler and making the lines straight. He wouldn’t do it freehand. I paid him \$6 a sign.

I always tried to save money. I kept track of sign supplies and would make Albert and the others check in their hammers at the end of the day — even fine someone \$5 if they lost a hammer.

Albert finally got disgusted with the procedure.

“Gilbert, you treat me like *communism*,” he chided, handing me a beatup hammer and a handful of nails at the end of the day.

Then we had to build displays, shelves, showcases. Uncle Earnest and I built the showcases, and Dad bought me the glass for the tops — at about \$10 each. I lined the inside base of the showcases with deep burgundy velvet from Dad’s store — the jewelry would look attractive placed on it. The store was taking shape. I got some Indian jewelry on credit, some on consignment, a few Navajo rugs, sandpaintings, pottery. I ordered lots of souvenirs, post cards, Mexican velvet paintings and leather goods.



Indian Village was colorful and unique. It got noticed, and people started pulling off the highway in droves — probably out of curiosity. And that was the start of something new for me. The traffic was turning.