

# A FAMILY FORGED IN TRADITION

*A family of artisans carries on a tradition of craftsmanship in a remote area of the Gigante Mountains.*

*-by Joan Tucker & Paul Papanek-  
-photos by Paul Papanek-*

When life offers you an opportunity – an opportunity to do something – go somewhere - that no one else you know – because you’ve asked them all – has gone or even knows about, you jump at it, forging into the unknown.

And so it was that we found ourselves crammed into a four-wheel drive Suburban, crawling slowly down the most extreme of unpaved roads in Baja California Sur, 30 kilometers into a 70 kilometer trip, to find a place that someone had scrawled questionable directions to on a napkin.

We were having a great time.

The “we” was Joan, my new assistant Rody (the conscripted son of our good friends Ana and Rodolfo), Hernando, our guide/driver from Todos Santos Eco Adventures, Hilario

Higuera, scion of a family of knife-making artisans whose home was our goal, and me.

But let’s back up a second.

The map on a napkin. It was sketched (and I use the term loosely) by our good friend, Edith Jimenez, the owner of Edith’s restaurant in Cabo. She had heard about, and traveled to, a remote rancho community in the Gigante Mountains where beautiful engraved knives are forged out of old car springs. As she described it, it was quite an adventure, and she thought it would

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make an interesting story for us. So did we. Despite her best efforts – coupled with our unfamiliarity with the Gigantes - she couldn't really describe to us how to get there. Hence, the map.

We knew better than to jump in the van and assume that we could find the place, so we buckled down and started to research. Googling turned up the minimum of info, but we finally learned that the community was Rancho Las Animas, that it was

somewhere between La Paz and Loreto, and that it was very inaccessible. So began a three-year quest to get there. Research was done, emails sent, phone calls were made, few were returned, and then...nothing. Either no one knew anything about Rancho Las Animas or seemed to be able to make contact with anyone in the remote, no cell service community. Until, that is, our very good friends at Todos Santos Eco Adventures told us that they found someone who knew someone who knew someone who might be able to help us. No one else could have pulled this off for us!

And that's how we came to be bouncing over this road, laughing our heads off when Hilario excitedly told us that, after an hour and a half, we were half-way there. We had only traveled about 30 kilometers.

We drove over washboard the size of a VW bug, through 300-yard long patches of "road" softer than talcum powder where we sunk up to the hubcaps, avoided herds of cattle, and forded a couple of beautiful and unexpected rivers, finally arriving, late in the afternoon, rattled but not too much the worse for the wear, at Rancho Las Animas. Hernando had gotten us through all of the obstacles unscathed, and we were thankful that we hadn't attempted this on our own. We'd probably still be stuck out there somewhere!

As we piled out of the truck, the welcoming committee, comprised of Hilario's entire extended family – his wife, sons, daughter-in law, grandkids, brothers and cousins, dogs, and a one-day old donkey - greeted us and made feel at home

right away. We sat under their large palapa drinking coffee and getting acquainted as the family told Hilario, who had been in La Paz for the past four days buying supplies and necessities, what had been happening on the rancho in his absence.

Finally it was time for a tour of the property. The ranch sits high in the mountains, with incredible views across the valleys. The land is dry but native greenery is everywhere. It's a tough landscape – one that doesn't yield easily to farming and ranching, but for over 300 years, Hilario's family has tamed it as best they can, and now they pump water from the shallow river nearby, use small solar panels to charge car

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**(BELOW AND FAR RIGHT)** | This page: The map on a napkin. Crossing an unexpected river on the road to Las Animas. The road to Las Animas, driving into the Gigante mountains. Opposite page: Small knives. The entrance into Las Animas. Big breakfast inside the Higuera home. Part of the welcoming committee. Hilario Higuera. A car spring that will soon become a knife.







batteries placed throughout the ranch that provide power for lights and a refrigerator, and grow what they need.

Hilario and his son, Juan de Dios, led us to the workshop. Enclosed on only two sides, it's filled with primitive and well-used anvils, a couple of work benches, and a small forge powered by an electric fan that looked like it had been salvaged from a piece of industrial equipment. The on/off switch consisted of wires twisted together. The tools, all old and beautifully hand-worn, were everywhere: hammers, sledghammers, files, saws, clamps, punches, engraving chisels, and vises. Many have been in the family for generations. We noticed, though, the absence of any kind of measuring tool, straight edge, pencils, or engraving patterns. A small pile of metal material waiting to become knives was nearby.

During a simple ranch dinner, as family members wandered in and out, we talked about the family's history on the ranch and learned how the art of knife-making was passed down from generation to generation. His grandfather told him that during the 1849 gold rush, a disgruntled and seasick sailor – a blacksmith by trade - on his way from the East Coast of the US to California, jumped ship in San Jose del Cabo and decided to try to make his way overland to gold country. He happened to know a thing or two about forging knives, and when he wandered onto the rancho, he imparted those skills to Hilario's great-great grandfather. The family has been making knives ever since.

As the night wore on, our arduous trip began to take its toll and finally, it was time to say goodnight. We pitched our tents under the palapa, but before bedding down,

we walked out to look at the black moonless sky full of more stars than we'd ever seen. We felt that we could almost reach up and touch them.

We woke up to roosters crowing, donkeys braying, and the sounds of Hilario and Juan de Dios having their coffee and preparing for the day's work. The children, unaccustomed to having guests camping on their patio right outside their house, watched us emerge from our little tents with what only be described as absolute amusement.

By the time we joined them in the workshop, the coals in the forge were glowing red-hot, and Hilario and Juan de Dios had picked out the raw material for the knife they would be making that day. Looking through their pile of car parts, they selected a 6-inch rectangle of metal – previously part of a car spring – and decided

**(FAR LEFT AND ABOVE)** | *Opposite page: Hilario Higuera and his son, Juan de Dios, hammering the ingot into the rough shape of a knife. Heating up the coals. Beginning to shape the ingot. The knife takes shape. Working the finish of the blade by scraping it in dirt and mud with a boot. This page: Filing the blade. Shaping the knife. Examining the rough knife.*

to make a large utility knife with a 10-inch blade - one that takes two people working together an entire day to complete. Almost before we knew what was happening, they shoved the metal deep into the forge. The fan wires were twisted together and the coals immediately roared to life with a big orange flame. When he decided it was ready,

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**(FAR LEFT AND ABOVE)** | *Sketching out the engraving pattern with a piece of charcoal. Engraving the knife. Hilario Higuera cutting the cow horn for the handle. The rough handles made from cow horn.*

the other, then put it on edge to shape the handle and blade, swapping out different size sledge hammers according to the part they were working on. The sound of metal hitting metal, coupled with the roar of the forge fan, was deafening. Yet, the easy companionship between father and son and the rote coordination and choreography, was captivating to watch.

When they were satisfied with the shape and thickness of the knife, they began filing. A vise, a thin tree limb propped up under the blade, and Hilario's stomach all combined to stabilize the knife as they made repeated

passes with a succession of finer and finer metal files.

While this was going on, Juan de Dios cut several sections from a cow horn and heated them slightly in the forge. He then soaked them in water for a while before clamping them into a vise to flatten them out. These pieces would soon become the handle. He held up the horn against the knife, and using files, a small hacksaw, and more heat, he contoured the horn to the exact shape of the handle. A little side note: the smell of cow horn being heated, sawed, and filed is not pleasant.

Hilario pulled out the now red-hot metal, rested it on one of the anvils, and Juan de Dios immediately began to assault it with an enormous sledge hammer. The back and forth between the forge and the anvil went on and on as the little piece of metal slowly began to take on the rough shape of a knife. They would hammer one side, then







**(FAR LEFT, ABOVE AND BELOW)** | *Opposite page: Applying the inlay to the handle. Juan de Dios making the leather sheath for a knife. This page: Juan de Dios holding the finished sheath. Cousin Jose Jesus, who makes leather goods such as saddle covers and shin guards to protect legs from cacti while riding horses.*



And then the magic happened. Taking a small piece of burnt wood from the forge, Hilario made a rough sketch of the engraving on the blade; nothing intricate, just barely an outline. He carefully chose his engraving chisel and just the right hammer, and started to tap tap tap the design into the metal. It was all free-hand. Graceful arcs, tight curlicues, and lines as straight as an arrow were laid into the steel. The knife rotated back and forth on the workbench with the slightest movement of his wrist. He changed chisels and hammers depending on the angle of the line. Every so often, he would take the knife outside, toss it on the ground, and polish it by grinding dirt into the blade with his boot.

With the engraving complete, the handle was attached and secured with little pieces of aluminum, engraved to compliment the design on the blade.

The entire knife was then polished by hand – cow horn handle and all. In the waning hour of the day, the setting sun reflected off of the now glowing steel as father and son proudly held up the finished knife.

Juan de Dios then cut a piece of leather to make the sheath. Using thick thread and large sewing needles, he labored over the table, cutting, trimming, folding, and sewing the leather until it became the perfect shape. He then tooled into it a design very much like the one his father had engraved into the knife. The package was complete.

While Juan worked on the sheath, Hilario took us on a walk through the community to visit several of his cousins. Jose Jesus showed us his hand-tooled covers for saddles. He also made sturdy leather chaps, specially designed for riding horses through the cactus-covered landscape. Another cousin, Adan, living nearby, made much smaller engraved knives with colorful handles. Back at Hilario's house, his other son, Ramon, was carving the frame of a saddle. And Hilario's wife, Maria, and their daughter-in-law, Lupita, proudly showed us their beautiful hand-embroidered works.

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For the Higuera family, and the entire community, tradition is more than just artistry; it's their way of life – farming, ranching, making their own saddles, chaps, embroidered fabrics, various tools and, of

**(LEFT, BELOW FAR RIGHT)** | *Opposite page: Cousin Adan, holding the small knives that he makes. Ramon Higuera, Hilario's son, making the frame for a saddle. Hilario's wife, Maria (standing), and Juan de Dio's wife, Lupita, who do all the embroidery work. This page: Hand-embroidered napkins made by Adan's wife and daughter. Hilario and Juan de Dios walking to the house. New large knives.*

course, the knives. It's the life of the Baja vaqueros as it was lived a century ago, only slightly modernized with solar panels, pickup trucks and, improbably, beautifully hand-tooled leather cell phone cases.

We were guests allowed to experience something that was actually larger than the making of the knife itself – a father, who had been taught his craft by his father and grandfather, who had learned it from his great grandfather, now handing down that tradition to his son. We felt privileged to have been allowed to be there.

We wanted to get going before it got dark, so we packed up the Suburban, said our thank-you's and goodbyes, shook hands and

exchanged hugs, and headed back toward the highway – 70 kilometers, three hours, and a world away.

*You can purchase the Rancho Las Animas knives at:*

- *Don Manuel Restaurant y Artisanias at km 112 on Hwy 1, Las Pocitas, BCS*
- *Santander Hardware Store at the corner of Santos Degollado and Aquiles Serdan, La Paz, BCS*
- *El Mercado Ranchero on Calle Morelos, Todos Santos, BCS*

*And for the best in adventure planning: Todos Santos Eco Adventures - <http://www.tosea.net>*

**El Fin!**

