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world heritage farming and heirloom rices

BY RENE FEATHERSTONE
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Have you heard of the rice whisperer, the mysterious Lady of Terraces? She arrives in Seattle in her Subaru loaded with seven kinds of rice you've probably not seen before, the grain in hues from ochre to blue-black, tan, even red.

Her name is Mary Hensley. Her Eighth Wonder, Inc is based in Ulm, Montana. You meet her when she's offering in-store samples. You taste her offering of rice, your palate surprised by a flavor profile pleasingly complex, the texture robust. When you compliment her, she smiles. She's so soft-spoken you suspect shyness. She's a quiet woman, middle-aged, no bravura. Which makes it all the more astonishing that she's doing her part in taming a monster—globalization, no less. Not that she puts it that way. She speaks of heirloom grains raised on ancient terraces in the Cordilleras of the Philippines, terraces that UNESCO declared a World Heritage Site in 1995.

Look at her photos. Imagine yourself: knife in hand, in a winding line of 80 farmers cutting panicles, thousands of panicles, ten thousands before the long, hot day is done. The next day you do it again, and again, under the gaze of mountain top spirits veiled in rain forest. Hensley said that about 300 rices are grown in the region, on farms measuring from 1/3 hectare to 1 hectare. A typical terrace village raises as many as 30 rice varieties, but many heirloom rices today hang on only at single farms. As the indigenous culture declines, so too does crop diversity.

Hensley is determined to help. "Being a responsible person in the world means caring about social justice. I have empathy," she explained her passion for the Cordillera tribes of Kalinga and Ifugao. She first got to know them three decades ago.

The delicious Tinawon rice.

ON THE CORDILLERA TERRACE

Raised in Montana, after high school Hensley went to U.C. Berkeley. She studied social work, and the February before graduating , she applied to join the Peace Corps. The required physical exam was taken at a military base in Oakland.

She had no choice regarding where she'd be sent; on the commercial flight to the Philippines she was one of about 40 new Peace Corps members. "The Peace Corps had their own office compound in Manila, with hundreds of staff. We had nine weeks of intensive language and culture training at a Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement site 50 miles from Manila." When it was time for her assignment, she opted for the mountains. "I love the mountains more than the ocean," she said. "I thought the mountains would be cooler than the low-land areas that were unbelievably hot. And what I had heard about the indigenous culture made the terraces sound like an interesting place."

A Philippine military convoy truck brought her to her destination in Kalinga Province, Culong Village in the Uma village area, Lubuagan the nearest municipality. "I wore jeans and a T-shirt. I had a woven backpack. I was the first white woman in that village." She was 22 years old. The seventeen families in the village were animists. "Their whole culture revolves around agricultural phases. They grow rice mainly, and some dry beans, and they gather greens like watercress."

Hensley lived in the rural health unit building, "a dispensary that had a door but no furniture. It was a nice wood building." Adjacent was the hut of the barrio captain who was in his 40s; he lived with his wife and mother, and five children, Hensley said. "They built a thatch outhouse for me, for that I was so thankful." Taking baths in the village remains a distinct memory for Hensley. "There was a spring, it was a public area. It became a nightly activity for the kids to watch me—I learned a lot of ways to use the sarong."

Rural Health assigned her to a midwife. The Peace Corps policy was to not ask for huge changes: "We were there to help them with the goiter problem, almost everyone there had goiters. We distributed iodized salt. The other program we participated in was to create a baseline for poverty and health, we weighed a lot of babies, as what babies weigh is an important indicator of that baseline."

But the actual birthings went on without Hensley. "They didn't let me get too close to births, they didn't know what effect my white spirit might have on the baby, and they weren't taking any chances."

Her two years on the terraces Hensley summed up as "not terribly exciting. You're there living with the indigenous people, not asking for anything special. You're very isolated, and that's a terrifically hard thing. It becomes really necessary to meet with other Peace Corps workers every so often. There were five others in the Province. We communicated by telegraph."

ON THE SEATTLE TERRACE

After the Peace Corps, Hensley ended up in Seattle, volunteering for church organizations and the YMCA which hired her as social worker in 1980, right in the middle of a decade-long immigration wave. "Between 1975 and 1985, about 1 million refugees from southeast Asia came to the United States, about 100,000 of them to Washington State. The first wave were mostly Vietnamese, they were the best educated who could afford to leave Vietnam. The second wave were the boat people, and in 1980 Laotian hill people and Cambodians came to Seattle; the Laotians were an ethnic minority, they were Hmong and Mien whom the CIA had trained to be guerilla fighters during the war. They didn't speak English, their own was not a written language. They had no skills that were immediately transferrable to our way of life."

Hensley's work with those refugees is remembered to this day, particularly her initiative in starting the still-active community garden near the intersection of Martin Luther King Jr. Way and McClellan Street. A recent visit turned up a steep series of terraces. An older black gentleman was busy sanding the wood walls of a building immediately below the garden. No, he wasn't involved in the garden, but usually someone was around "Go up to the top." The gate's an arch fashioned from string-tied bamboo. The steps climb by terrace after terrace, with stacked cinder blocks holding up the growing beds. Fall-planted garlic stood tall in neat rows—lots of garlic It's obviously the primary crop. Along the garden: a sidewalk overlooking the many terraces. A bench, and a chair, but no one at work here this afternoon.

Still, the beds spoke of long hours of shovel work and stooped-over planting, tedious weeding, careful watering from the evenly spaced faucets, quick-handed harvesting, and then, again, the shovel work of soil prep.

A type of chard over here, some bok choy there, a few rows of onions. On the beds not yet planted were piled sticks about 5 feet long; the plan here seemed to be for beans or some other climbing vegetable.

The black gent noticed us coming back down, and shut off his sander.

"I remember when the Asian people first came here. All of them, even the older ones, had known nothing but war all their lives. The first years they grew opium poppies here, they did the whole thing, they made the slits and collected the opium. After a couple years the city told them not to do that anymore."

We heard compassion for the refugees in his voice.

Hensley was not surprised when we told her of the conversation. "In those years Americans welcomed immigrants, there was a sense that we owed those people something because they'd supported us in Vietnam. It was a real community effort to help them get used to our way of life."

She remembers the day she started the garden. "The Mount Baker Apartments were one of the housing projects that had been built for refugee families. I happened to live in the neighborhood. After spending two years in a mountain area with poor people, I knew well that they were farmers. The hillside was a total blackberry bramble, oh, it was dense. I went there with clippers, machete, shovels and hoes..."

Machete? "Yes, I'd brought one back from the Philippines.'

It must have been June, Hensley said. "I remember the day as terrifically hot. The Hmong women watched me, I knew most of them, they were in classes I was giving at the YMCA. I got redder and redder from the heat. At some point they made me stop, they thought I might have a heart attack. They went back to their apartments and came out with hoes and digging instruments—the handle was about 1 1/2-foot long, they were made for mountainside digging...they'd brought them with them when they came over."

They'd also brought seeds, bok choy, and, yes, poppy. "Ceremonial opium use is part of their culture. In the beginning nobody realized what type of flowers they were growing."

Looking back after all these years, Hensley remembers the start of the garden as "an amazing transformation." Certainly it ranks as an example of guerilla gardening, she noted: "Had we asked anyone for permission, they'd have said no."

The terracing and eventual metamorphosis into a more formal garden under the Seattle Community P-Patch Program came after Hensley left Seattle in 1983.

In the meantime, many Hmong refugees proved themselves enterprising truck farmers after learning American ways, Hensley pointed out. "Half of the vegetable and flower sellers at Pike Place Market today are Hmong."

RETURN TO CORDILLERA

Hensley swapped coasts and settled in Vermont where she became a travel agent. Together with a partner she also grew organic hay and