

CHOTEAU ACANTHA

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Ex-Choteau woman launches rice firm

By Melody Martinson
Acantha editor

When Mary Hensley was growing up in Choteau in the 1960s and 1970s, she never dreamed that she would one day become the founder of a project to help impoverished rice farmers in the Philippines save their traditional rice varieties and find economic success.

But she followed a path that led her to found the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project and to relocate from Vermont back to Montana to open Eighth Wonder Inc., a rice importing business that will someday be co-owned with farmer cooperatives in the mountainous Cordillera region of northern Luzon, the largest of the Philippine islands.

"It is really an incredible story about trying to bring economic, cultural and environmental revitalization to indigenous farmers through culturally sensitive economic development," Hensley said during a recent interview with the Acantha.

She is inviting Choteau residents to come and listen to her story and learn more about the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project at a free public



Acantha photo by Melody Martinson

Former Choteau resident Mary Hensley has launched a nonprofit business designed to help Philippine farmers market their heirloom rice in America.

program on Jan. 29 at 6:30 p.m. at Mountain Front Market in Choteau. Hensley will present a Power Point program about the Cordillera rice producers and the project and will provide samples of several dishes made from heirloom rice varieties.

Hensley grew up in Choteau, one of three children of Al and Claire



RICE, Inc. is a Philippine-based nonprofit that helps educate rice farmers to grow and market their heirloom strains.

Hensley, who operated the local Hensley Motel. Her parents died in the 1970s after she had gone away to college in California and her siblings moved away so she lost touch with Choteau as she pursued her degree in social work. After college, she joined the Peace Corp and did a stint in the Philippines, working in the Cordillera mountains. One of the enduring memories of that volunteer work, she said, was the beautiful fragrance of the rice cooked by the indigenous farmers.

After finishing her Peace Corps hitch, Hensley eventually returned

to the United States and settled in Seattle, where she worked for many years as a social worker. She spent much of her time working with Vietnamese and Laotian refugees who settled in the Seattle area after the Vietnam War. Eventually, the intensity of social work took its toll, and, burned out, she relocated to Vermont, where she took a very different job as a travel agent. She loved the work and as a fringe benefit, she was able to travel extensively.

A few years ago, however, the small, family-owned firm began losing business to the Internet, and eventually, the owner was forced to cut back and downsize.

The change, Hensley said, gave her the chance to look at what she really wanted to do next, and after much thought, she decided that she wanted to go back to the Philippines and launch an economic development project that would benefit the people of the Cordillera region. These people were subsistence farmers who were very geographically isolated and who lived in poverty.

Of course, she remembered the rice. "It literally smelled so good

See RICE, page 12

RICE

when it was cooking that you could hardly wait to eat it," she said.

Methodical and thoughtful, once Hensley decided to pursue this path, she immediately took steps to do it right. At age 48, she enrolled in graduate school and earned a master's degree in nonprofit management with an emphasis in social entrepreneurship. "The new trend in nonprofits is how do you make them self-sustaining and not dependent on grants," she said.

During her time in business school, she worked on the rice project as part of her formal studies. "It gave me an opportunity to do an initial feasibility study on selling rice as a gourmet product," she said. She also did a nine-month internship with a free-trade organization in the Philippines, returning there after a 27-year absence, and she did her thesis on creating a retail, value-

added agricultural business in which the producers are part owners.

While in graduate school, she met a woman named Vicky Garcia, whose background was in business management and organization. Garcia would eventually become the executive director of RICE, Inc., a nonprofit corporation that is dedicated to preserving heirloom rice and the culture of community rice production. RICE's name is an acronym for: Revitalize Indigenous Cordillera Entrepreneurial Initiatives. The corporation provides training and education to help the Cordillera rice farmers improve their production and build functioning marketing cooperatives.

The challenges facing Hensley were great. She was dealing with farmers who had no concept of global marketing or even small-scale exporting of their rice varieties that

were raised for their own consumption. She had to deal with three different tribes who all spoke different languages, and she had to work with farmers who were producing hundreds of different varieties of heirloom rices with some varieties differing from field to field, valley to valley.

Hensley spent three months going from village to village, talking to farmers, mayors, state agricultural officials, putting together commitments for them to grow rice for export. Out of this experience, Hensley and Garcia formed RICE Inc., which has received outstanding support from the United Nations and the Philippine federal department of agriculture.

"It's a long-term project, and we're building everything from the ground up," Hensley said. With RICE Inc. in place in the

Philippines, Hensley began working on the rice-importing business here and incorporated Eighth Wonder Inc. in 2006. She relocated to Montana, where her friendship with the Matheson family from Conrad led her to leading Montana organic farmer David Chen, founder of Timeless Seeds, who has served as her mentor.

"In my wildest imagination, I never believed that I could come back to Montana and do the international type of work that I wanted to," she said.

Hensley lives in Great Falls and has an office in the Timeless Seeds facility at Ulm. She does not have a retail shop, but sells the heirloom rice online and through a few grocery outlets, including Rocky Mountain Front Market in Choteau, 2 Js in Great Falls, the Good Food Store in Missoula, the Real Food store in

Helena and Global Village in Billings.

She also has a contact with a restaurant supplier in California who ships her rice to some of its customers, that include some 4,000 high-end restaurants across the nation.

She imports several different varieties of rice, most of which are very rare. "They are a true medium-grained variety. They are designated as Javanica rice," Hensley said. "This sort of strain has been found in the mountains of Java, Madagascar, and here in the Philippines in this mountain region."

Hensley said she has had a number of different chefs try these varieties and give her feedback on the rice. Three of the main varieties she imports are the White Tinawon, Tinawon Fancy and Ulikan Red. She also sells several dessert rices of the glutinous variety — Ifugao

from page 1

Diket, Ifugao Violet and Kalinga Jekot.

All of these rices are processed by hand and must be washed several times before they are cooked to remove all the hull dust. "It doesn't taste quite right if you don't wash it," she said.

Now in her fourth year of business, Hensley says the future looks bright. "There's incredible potential there," she says.

Her priorities in 2009 are marketing and expanding distribution. In 2008, she imported 15 tons, down from 17 tons in 2007 because of production problems in the Philippines. "I could probably have sold double what I had," she said.

Hensley is having the time of her life with this new venture, and says, "To actually do something that you're passionate about — what can be better than that?"