

**Published: Summer Issue, 2015, The Progressive**

Billy Izzard and the Milltown Garden Patch

By: Erica A. Langston

Owen Street winds behind a cluster of sagging wooden houses built for sawmill laborers throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, adult sons of former laborers stand on wilting front porches scratching their facial hair, their chests, their groins. The skunked sweat of warm beer marinates their beards. They look west towards Missoula, past the confluence of the Clark Fork and Blackfoot rivers and the glaring fluorescents of the Town Pump truck stop. They spit chew. There is a bar, a gas station, and a faint taste of heavy metals in the well water. Empty chip bags and cellophane wrappers roll like tumbleweeds over the train tracks.

On the south side of the tracks, a whitewashed, weathered sign forks the dirt road leading up to The Milltown Garden Patch. From a distance the Garden Patch could deceptively be mistaken for a pet cemetery, or a pillaged scrapyards, or a fenced-in plot of nihilism. An industrial-sized black water tower to the east looks over the garden, throwing a deep shadow onto the plots at high noon. Tin pie plates convulse in the wind at the end of strings tied to wired fencing; magpies stay away. The garden runs the length of a football field and, upon closer inspection, is punctuated with efforts of hominess. The earth is cleared and soft underfoot. Rock pillars outline a gateway decorated with scraps of metal welded into art. Homemade scarecrows, pastel birdhouses, and a quaint shed suppress the poverty looming just down the road.

With the exception of the double-priced spotty bananas at the gas station counter, the garden is the only place residents find fresh produce during the short Montana growing season. An unincorporated community built around a now bankrupt lumber industry, locals live at the mouth of the largest Superfund site in the western United States. Abandoned by industry and government, few community resources exist for the nearly 1,700 people who live there.

A mere 10 miles away, Missoula is fully stocked with grocery stores, two Walmarts, and multiple farmers market. It may as well be on another planet for what it costs in gas to get there. It's money many Milltown residents don't have. While Missoula is lush with nonprofit gardens run by degree-holding, New York Times subscribers who aspire to integrate the local poor into the food movement, into "community", into their mission statements, Milltown gets by on sodium and trans fats. There is no system to buffer their poverty, no grocery store, food bank, or philanthropist subsidizing their nutritional needs. Instead, they plant and dig and harvest what little they can in the 100 days between frosts.

\*\*\*

A harsh autumn wind draws sharp through Hellgate Canyon, and Billy Izzard is on his hands and knees inside the Milltown Garden Patch pulling carrots from a weedy plot. "What's a party without a windstorm?" he says, coughing hard and dry into a clenched dirty fist. Billy is not an educated man, or so he frequently says in conversation. He is a Vietnam veteran, a survivor of the Detroit foster care system, a retired mason, a recovering alcoholic, and the founder of The Milltown Garden Patch. He is not a conventional gardener, or a new-age hipster gardener, or a yoga gardener. "I didn't go to school for any of this shit," Billy says, arranging the piled vegetables in front of the tool shed. "Everything has been the school of hard knocks. In April I learned how to turn on a computer."

It was never Billy's intention to start an organic community garden. Having been laid off after a lifetime of masonry work, he found himself searching for meaning on lone evening walks along quiet back roads. It was on one of these wanderings that he stumbled onto the flat, rocky cleared patch of land that overlooked Milltown. He paced the length of the field twice over, stopping to take in the view of the train tracks, the shuttered storefront windows, and the abandoned buildings down below. Turning over a smooth-faced stone in his hand, he was overcome with the idea that this abandoned plot could serve a greater purpose, and so could he. The Water Users Association owns the abandoned lot, and it took little

convincing before they granted Billy permission to cultivate it for community use. In the spring of 2010, Billy broke ground and the Milltown Garden Patch was born.

He's spent countless hours alongside friends and neighbors prying river rock out of compacted soil, pulling out entire groves of deep-rooted knapweed, and spreading organic fertilizer, like chicken manure, by hand. His motivation to keep the garden going, despite meager harvests and dismal odds of success, is deeply personal.

"I went to bed hungry many nights," Billy tells me one drizzly November afternoon over coffee, his slate-gray sweatshirt punched with holes the size of golf balls, "and it sticks with you". He was one of five children in a household rife with addiction and abuse. "I didn't know my dad. My mom drank real heavy. We didn't have an income." He doesn't look at me when he says this. He takes a drink of coffee and it's clear that the caffeine does little to ease whatever it is he's experiencing as he tells this story. "There's nothing worse than seeing someone hungry." And in Milltown, Billy says, people are hungry.

As a kid, armed with a stolen café saltshaker to season his bounty, Billy and his friends would jump fences at night and strip tomato plants of their fruit. In the summer they'd bike 24 miles out of Detroit to the small town of Utica and fish for a week at a time, eating themselves sick on green apples that grew on trees the city didn't have.

Their antics may have remained child's play if it weren't for one figure who proved central to Billy's love of gardening. "It started with the Hatchet Man," Billy says. He recalls long white hair and a scraggly beard like a child sifting through a dream of Santa Claus. While much of Billy's history is shrouded in drug abuse, drunk driving accidents, and friends overdosing in the years following Vietnam, Billy talks about this part of his life with giddy enthusiasm and awe. "We called him the Hatchet Man because he always carried a hatchet and was always making kindling," Billy says. "We were all afraid that he'd get us and chop us up."

One hot afternoon, Billy's friends dared him to brave the property for a drink of water. "They didn't think I had the balls to do it," he gloats. "It was good water. It was well water, not like in the city. So I go up and knock on the door, and the Hatchet Man comes out and says, 'Come here, boy. I need your help.'" Billy helped the man pile and stack wood, and their friendship began. "He was amazing with that ax," Billy says. "He'd never answer a question though. He'd just say 'God gave you two eyes and two ears. Pay attention.' So I did." The Hatchet Man taught Billy which plants need light and which prefer shade. He'd pull a vegetable off a stem, slice it open with a tarnished pocket knife, and show Billy how to clean it, how to save the seeds. Instead of pilfering fruit from neighbor's yards, Billy began raiding grocery store dumpsters before collection day to scrape seeds out of the rotting fruit to dry. Soon, he started his own garden.

When Billy and his siblings were parceled out to the State after his mother was arrested for reasons he didn't want to go into, he took his newfound love of gardening with him. His mother's arrest was the beginning of a long path of institutionalization for Billy, spending his teenage years in and out of juvenile detention and foster care and later, after Vietnam, in jail for drunk driving and drug abuse. His hands would ache to get back into the soil for the rest of his life.

Despite the instability that cloaked his life, he attempted to garden through it all. "Years ago," Billy says, "I went to therapy through the VA and they said, 'Well, yeah you're nuts but you got your therapy right there in your backyard. What we can figure out about you is that every place you've lived you've always gardened.' I was gardening on top of rooftops when I was a kid in Detroit. I've always had a garden."

His love for gardening is irrepressible. He slips the topic into conversations with friends and strangers with the ease of a skilled raconteur. One day I meet Billy for coffee at a local café, and when I arrive he is bent waist-deep over the counter spinning a tale about compost to the barista. She is enthralled. She leans into the circumference of his breath. "Hang on just a second," she says when I approach, not breaking eye contact with Billy, "I have to hear the end of this story." The end is but a

sentence away, and Billy slams it on the counter like a fat tip. They both climax with laughter about dirt. She wipes bleeding eyeliner from underneath her lashes, holds her hand to her chest, and has to catch her breath before she asks me what I'd like to drink.

\*\*\*

It's the end of September, and Billy has been piling root vegetables all morning, preparing for the end-of-the season potluck he's organized for the gardeners who rent out plots. "I got enough carrots to supply the entire town of Milltown," he says in a voice grating with pride and years of tobacco. "It's the only thing that grew worth a crop this year." He rubs his hand beneath the brim of his mason ball cap, tightens his graying ponytail, and pulls another carrot out of the soft earth. "I just don't get it. I mean the beets are right next to the carrots. They take the same nutrients. But the biggest beet I had was maybe an inch and a half across. It broke my heart." And the way he says it, it is as if he is talking about a premature baby, or a two-legged dog, or a distant cousin killed in Iraq. He believes his heart is broken, and so do I.

He adds the last carrot from the row to the mound. The beets are not the only crop to break his heart this year. The pumpkins are soft. They are more yellowish-green than orange, more vine than fruit. "I'm not sure what I'm going to do," Billy says. The plants are hungry for nutrients, the beets and the pumpkins especially. But the garden is broke, and the soil is thin. He's tried everything from rabbit pellets to sulfur, but his efforts have been slow to show improvement. This year he's collecting leaves to mix into the soil and trading buckets of carrots for chicken manure, which is rich in nitrogen, but easy to over apply. "They say chicken manure is real hot, that you can burn your garden with it." He shrugs. "I've always said you got to skin your nose a few times to figure it out."

Back at his corroding Chevy S10, he sits in the passenger seat with the door open and breathes deep through a Pyramid Full Flavor filter. "I don't like to smoke in the garden," he says, flicking the lighter with his blue-blood thumb. He looks down the quiet dirt road and then checks his watch. It's 2:10.

People are late, and Billy is anxious. He flicks his lighter when he's anxious, or pulls weeds, or rubs his thick goatee. He looks back at the pumpkin patch and then back at his watch. A small dust storm erupts around the bend of the road and Billy arches his neck to identify the vehicle. It's his wife, Sharney, who he affectionately refers to as "The Bride," and their three-year-old grandson.

Billy fawns over the boy earnestly before releasing him into the pumpkin patch to get select a pumpkin for carving. Sharney is small, bird-like with a tight back and a pale complexion. Her long runaway white hair compliments Billy's warlock eyebrows uncannily. They have walked similar paths in life. Evidence of substance abuse, among other kinds, is tucked into the folds of wrinkles around their eyes and lips. They lean into each other and pass a cigarette back-and-forth with such intimacy I feel embarrassed to watch.

Almost two decades ago, Sharney provided Billy stability at time he needed it most. Vietnam friends were overdosing on hard drugs and drinking themselves to death. Billy had just finished a jail sentence for drunk driving. He unsuccessfully flirted with sobriety in the days before running his truck into a ditch, drunk, on the way to a friend's wake.

"I decided it was time to grow up," Billy recounts, "That was my last drink. It wasn't easy. For about a year I'd kept a 6-pack of Red Wolf in the fridge and a fifth of Jack Daniels in the freezer. From time to time I'd open it up and just say, 'You want to be that guy? Go ahead. It's right there, man.' I would tempt myself. Sometimes I'd grab it and I'd just stop and say 'No. No. I don't want to be that guy anymore.' Then I met The Bride."

It wasn't long before Sharney and Billy started a life together in Plains, Montana. With Sharney's support, Billy began gardening again. "I learned in Plains how much food I could grow," he says. "I just went crazy. I was growing all this produce. I had a fricken vineyard. I had this long-term plan that when all this stuff starts yielding out I could just retire. But we had to get out of Plains." In a town where locals

rarely left, and few new faces moved in, the couple struggled to find any sense of community. “We just couldn’t find our own niche.”

Eventually, they relocated to Milltown, to a quaint peach house with a stone fireplace that stands out amongst a sea of peeling paint and dilapidation. From highway 210, the two-story tree house he built for his grandkids rises above the neighboring homes like a stately watchtower.

From Billy’s property line, you could almost spit on the front door of Harold’s, the only bar in town. If Billy is anything, he’s a man who stares temptation in the face. A six-foot wooden fence serves as the only visual barrier between the two buildings. The fence is decorated with more than two-dozen birdhouses, similar to those adorned around the Garden. Billy built them himself, another facet of his therapy. Neighbors were initially cynical of his presence. “How goddamn nuts is that guy?” one neighbor said as she walked to Harold’s to nurse a hangover. She pointed a waving finger at the row of birdhouses, “How much therapy does he need?”

The locals have warmed up to Billy and his oddities. “He never comes in for a drink,” a blonde, pregnant bartender says. “One time, he stood in the doorway and someone bought him a pop, but that’s it. He’ll park his truck at the bar and crack the window and people just throw cash on the seat and take some plants or vegetables or whatever he’s got extra of in the back of the truck.”

In the spring and fall schoolchildren travel from equally forsaken neighboring towns to tend plots designated to each of their schools and learn about organic gardening. Several neighbors rent plots of their own and put their efforts into producing crops that pickle and can well through the winter. Other locals walk their children down to the plots, even when the earth is frozen over and buried under snow. For many, the garden is, if nothing else, a place to look at in a place where there isn’t much to look at.

\*\*\*

In the distance, dirt kicks into the air and a fleet of vehicles snake their way to the garden. Billy hands the cigarette to Sharney for one last drag before putting it out on the bottom of his shoe and tucking it back into the pack. Smiling, he stands, stretches, and bounces on his heels with the nerves and excitement of a boxer. Sharney joins their grandson in the garden. "I hope there's a good turn out," Billy says. "I hope Lidia brings carrot cake." The first car comes to a halt in the dirt parking lot and children tumble out the backseat in whirling excitement.

They run towards Billy and wrap themselves around his legs. "Billy!" the middle child yells. Her upper lip is stained with pink juice. The sweatshirt she's wearing swallows her knobby elbows and sharp wrist bones. The younger children are sticky, their hair untamed. The youngest has a fresh scrape on his nose. The blood is not dry.

Another car pulls up. Billy's grin widens. His teeth hang separately in his mouth, gapped and discolored from youthful bar fights and black coffee. The children release their grip and run with feral enthusiasm towards the pumpkins they've watch slowly swell all summer. The oldest girl stops and turns, "Billy?" she asks.

"Yes, Amber?"

"Can we pick them now, Billy? If we can carry our own pumpkin, can we pick it now?" she asks.

"Damn right you can." He rubs his hand under the brim of his hat and moves to help the guests unload their dishes. A tall corpulent man sniffs a soda bottle refilled with homemade wine. Lidia arrives with carrot cake. Tin pie plates chime and scrape against the chain link. The dirt road stirs in the wind.