

The Origins of MUD

by Rick Stern

Part II: DHP Bears Fruit, Scatters its Seeds to the Four Winds

If you tuned in to the Spring issue of Backyard Culture, you learned about the evolution of the Down Home Project from its humble beginnings in the mid-70s as Wild Willy's Chicken Farm to a more widely recognized community resource. Those involved in the genesis of DHP envisioned it to be a clearinghouse for ideas and information about how city dwellers can live a more sustainable lifestyle.

While those who visited the Phillips Street site in the early '80s left with a wealth of knowledge and inspiration, they also often left with more tangible items. In fact, many people who later became deeply involved in DHP and MUD first visited the site to procure seeds and young plants for their own gardens. For example, my first visit to the MUD site was catalyzed by a quest for seeds to plant in my greenhouse during the blustery fall of 1994.

"I used to go by there and help out and get plants and seeds starting in about '78," said Kerry Wall-Maclane, whose stamp remains indelibly imprinted on the history of the Down Home Project. Founders of DHP such as Bill McDorman and later arrivals such as John Schneeberger and Karen Coombs were all serious "seed freaks," so it made sense that DHP was drawn into a program to educate the Montana public about diminishing diversity in the world's seed portfolio.

"A now-defunct group called Northern Rockies Action got this grant to promote genetic diversity in cultivars and to talk about the world seed situation," said Wall-Maclane. "Nobody living at DHP really wanted to take on this grant project. "At the time, my wife Sue and I were living on an intentional community in Racetrack, MT, between Deer Lodge and Anaconda. We got pregnant, and Sue's folks wanted us to move to a place with a telephone. So we moved into the house at 619 Phillips, learned all we could about the world seed situation, and went around to college campuses and shared what we'd learned.

Meanwhile, back at the Phillips Street site, McDorman, Schneeberger, Coombs and others formulated their own response to the world's diminishing diversity of seeds. They nurtured Garden City Seeds into a company that remains well known for carrying many rare varieties of seeds. Schneeberger and Coombs owned and managed Garden City Seeds for many years, selling the company three years ago.

While they were working towards many of the same goals, McDorman and the others didn't always see eye-to-eye. "We started having di-



High Mountain Garden Supply, the precursor to Garden City Seeds

vergences between where we thought the seed company and the organization should go," said McDorman, who recently visited the MUD site after reading the re-published first installment of this series. "I knew that John and Karen would do a great job. Instead of arguing, I decided that Garden City Seeds would be all right. "So I went home to Idaho and started High Altitude Gardens, which is basically similar to Garden City Seeds. We've been going now for 20 years [since 2000], and we've developed customers in Bolivia, Nepal, and in the mountains all over the world. And all the while, we and Garden City Seeds have been really supportive of each

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other.”

“In 1984, an extension agent named Lily Tuholske encouraged us to take on a kids’ garden project,” said Kerry Wall-Maclane. “That quickly evolved into the Northside Community Gardens. Some mothers over at Head Start volunteered to take care of the gardens if we’d teach horticulture classes there.

“By 1985, we got very involved with the youth homes and a group called MASH which is now part of Opportunity Resources. We started giving courses in horticultural therapy. We were trying to integrate all different types of people: workfare folks, low-income folks, senior citizens, kids working off community service...”

This sort of creative programming became crucial for providing both therapy and valuable nutrients for people who increasingly saw their public support dry up thanks to the Reagan administration’s efforts to gut social services. Ironically, as they were slashing social programs, Reagan and his cronies found it in their hearts to honor efforts that helped people help themselves, recognizing the Down Home Project in a 1986 report entitled “Up From Dependency.”

Unfortunately, the nation’s conservative political climate was mirrored in Missoula’s local government. Wall-Maclane and others worked for several years to try to start a community solar greenhouse modeled after one in Cheyenne, Wyoming. With much of the groundwork laid for this project, an anticipated and much-needed source of government funding became unavailable because Missoula’s city govern-

ment refused to cooperate.

In 1986, with Schneeberger and Coombs having moved Garden City Seeds up the Bitterroot Valley, the Wall-Maclanes became pregnant with their second child. They moved from the Phillips Street site—first to North 2nd Street, then to Providence, Rhode Island to work on “a DHP-type project with lots of money.” (author’s note: Hmmm, wouldn’t that be nice...)

Meanwhile, with the enthusiasm and energy of the early movers and shakers having departed, the resources at the Phillips Street site dwindled.

Then came 1987, when long-time DHP and MUD board member Leslie Wood first became involved. Leslie’s husband Will actually preceded her, joining the DHP board in 1987, then handing the position over to Leslie in 1988.

“As a neighborhood resident, I was, of course, familiar with DHP,” recalled Leslie, who served as the longest-standing board member in the project’s history. “I had come over a number of times to buy seeds.”

By mid 1988, the Wall-Maclanes had returned from Providence and moved up the Bitterroot to help out with Garden City Seeds. Kerry Wall-Maclane resumed some of his duties as the supervisor of the DHP site, but activity on the site had waned and the project was set to face its largest challenge to date.

“In June of 1988, things kind of fell apart on site,” said Leslie Wood. “There was an electrical fire in the house at 629 Phillips. It was really lucky that nobody got hurt. I think the only fatality was a bird. There was no money and no insurance. That was the dark period.”

Newly committed to the project, Wood dipped into her own savings to support the re-

pairs, and worked together with Mark Anderlich—who had been running the seed store on site—to repair extensive damage to the building. The repairs completed, Wood grabbed the reins of the organization and began the revitalization of the MUD site.

“I was kind of managing the property ‘cause I was the only board member left,” reminisced Wood. “Down Home still existed, they were just moving their focus up the Bitterroot.” As DHP’s acting accountant at the time (and for many years thereafter), Leslie was well aware of the bills to be paid. So she decided to rent out the properties, thus overseeing the site’s transition from “the dark period” to “the rainbow period.”

For over a year, the site was populated by a number of people who were active in some regard with the Rainbow Family. Prominent among the residents at this time was Chuck Mills, who ran the highly successful “Northside Gallery” at 625 Phillips.

While these folks were “mostly good tenants,” according to Wood, the activities on the Phillips Street site seemed to diverge from the original intent of the founders of DHP. Which leads us to 1990, when a group of students revitalized the educational and demonstration components of the Down Home Project by creating a little ol’ subsidiary known as MUD.

To be continued...

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