

Beginnings: a Billy Story

Beginnings are so important. Yet where does the tale of the Billys truly begin; and what is true of a tale from only one perspective when it is about a thing that affects so many? Well, my perspective is all I have so this is what I remember from my point on this wheel.

The genesis of the Billy Club, I believe, actually started a couple of years before the first gathering in 1988. My neighbor on Greenfield Ranch, a nurse named Lynn Meadows, came to me and Jackson and Terry and Richard with the story of a young man in the Ukiah hospital dying of AIDS who was alone with no friends or family. This seemed absolutely tragic to her that anyone would have to go through this with no support whatsoever. In talking, the idea of creating an AIDS volunteer network formed -- soon began the first training for MCAVN (Mendocino County AIDS volunteer network).

Not surprisingly for this rural county, our first clients were men who lived in the hills. Having an isolated lifestyle made living with AIDS much more challenging, and made it more important to find other gay men who lived rurally so we could support one another.

This was also true for those of us who did not have AIDS, yet longed for contact with other gay men since we were so few and far between. For me, personally, I loved living the homesteading, back-to-the-land lifestyle, yet I felt isolated from my gay identity with no place to meet others or even to know how to discover who and where we all were. (This was a decade before the internet became widespread.)

In our discussions of such issues we decided to put out a call for a "Good Times Gathering For Rural Gay Men" for Memorial Day weekend in 1988. The genesis circle for this first gathering were Steven Day, his partner Michael Huddleston, Henry Horton (all men from around Laytonville), Terry Brown, Richard DiGiulio, Jackson Branum, and Ron (that's me!) Vanscoyk (all from Greenfield Ranch).

Terry had been talking to Shelly Martin from the Health Department, and it turned out there were funds for AIDS education that would contribute refreshments and supplies to help this event go well. We scheduled the party (because really that's all it was and all it was intended to be) to be held at Henry Horton's house in Laytonville. Henry also arranged for overnight use of the Triad house. This was an amazing house on a hill overlooking the Laytonville valley. It had a whole hidden wing of the house that you accessed by sliding back a wall bookshelf. It was shaped like a two story horseshoe with a hot tub in the middle and decks all around. What a fun place for a get-together!

We knew a few rural men (very few!) and there was a list of names from a potluck lunch that had happened a couple of years back, and some names given us from a bar that existed for a few months at Lake Mendocino, and a few more from another bar at Clearlake Oaks in Lake County. Altogether we had a list of twenty-seven names.

Terry did a cut and paste call (you know, scissors and paper) that he and Richard and Jackson and I sat around our dining room table licking stamps and stuffing envelopes to send out.

The day of the event saw sixty-five men show up, and we had ourselves a time! What a delight to see so many gay men together and share stories of our common lifestyle. In that first circle we didn't go much deeper than to say our names and where we lived and a bit about what drew us together; but we sure had some thigh slappin' fun with a fiddle on the porch, eating together, then going up the hill to the Triad house for the night and, finally, all departing the next day with "whajushappened" grins on our faces.

Well that was certainly good enough to do again!

The second gathering was scheduled for Labor Day weekend that same year (1988) at Jackson's and my place on Greenfield Ranch just west of Ukiah. This time we had a list of over sixty names and, sitting around our kitchen table addressing and stamping and stuffing envelopes, we kinda got lazy and didn't want to hand write the return address on all of them. We asked Richard and got his consent to use the rubber stamp for his hand made card business that he called "The Billy Club".

Now a bit about that name... As it happened, when Terry and Richard got together, Richard had recently broken up with a man named Terry and didn't feel nearly as warm to the name of this new man in his life as he did to the man himself. Wanting to speak affectionately to each other (as lovers do) they fished around for another affectionate name they could call one another. Annette seemed a bit too demure, and Bronco seemed a bit too bold. Billy -- now there was a name even Goldilocks would like -- just right! It is indeed a name of affection to this day. (Imagine we could have been the Annette Club!)

So Richard, an incredibly talented artist of hand-made cards, began selling his cards and wanted a name for his card business -- which brings us back to the story of us lazy bumpkins sitting around the dining room table not wanting to hand write all of the return addresses to the second gathering call.

Richard's rubber stamp had not only the name "The Billy Club", but also their P.O. Box address, which would serve perfectly well for a return address. Voila, out went the sixty-one calls.

We were delighted and surprised to have well over a hundred men show up for this two-day gathering. The circle stories went a bit deeper as we shared more of ourselves -- there was no doubt we were onto something!

Two men who lived in Manchester on the coast were so delighted at the energy we conjured that they offered to host a gathering at their place the following Memorial day in 1989. Being that country folk often had dogs at home, we thought it might be ok to allow folks to bring their dogs. Omigod! There were well over thirty dogs that showed up at the third gathering, and what an experience that was! Dog poop everywhere, dogfights during meals -- it became known as "the dog gathering". There was as much attention on the dogs as there was on each other. From this experience came our policy of no pets allowed at gatherings. This also was the gathering where Bob and Roy from Heartwood discovered the Billys.

The fourth gathering was back to our land on Labor Day weekend of 1989 -- this was the gathering that debuted our first talent/no talent show. What a discovery that we could entertain ourselves so thoroughly and delightfully! Our connection to one another began feeling like a heart-centered community of friends and we really began looking forward to this time together.

During the following year (1990) we began inviting some of our dear friends from the more urban bay area. Well, it was one of those sparks-hitting-dry-tinder moments. The ensuing flood of bay area men proved to be quite a splash on our networking-of-rural-gay-men experience. Many feelings were shared in heart circle regarding protecting our rural gatherings from the onslaught of the higher population of urban men.

Many rural Billys felt that the Billy Club was the only thing going for gay men who lived in the rural counties, whereas the bay area offered many venues for gay men to get together. As the sharing deepened, we became conscious of the fact that the bars and discos didn't really create the opportunity for coming together and meeting in such a rich way. Turns out those coming from urban areas were feeling isolated as well. What was happening at these gatherings was a different nurturing than was available in all the city venues.

Sometime during this period is when Dave Carroll bought Saratoga Springs and began hosting the Billy Gatherings; and Bob and Roy invited us to celebrate the New Year at Heartwood for the first time, but the mists of time have made vague to me the exact timing of these things. I do know that Jackson and I hosted the summer gathering in that third year with two hundred thirty Billys showing up, and was it festive!

A bit about the first Heartwood gathering holds some interest in our evolving history. It was at this gathering where, for the first time, we were at a location that had women in their community -- wondrous, heartfelt, conscious women and straight identified men who took to us and we to them. The loving Billy energy was palpable and irresistibly enticing to this wonderful healing community/school. They asked to join us in our heart circles. (I believe one Billy left the gathering at the thought that a woman would sit with us in heart circle.)

They were invited to join us at one heart circle and that was one of the more powerful circles I have ever attended, with all hearts opening at Lisa's story. We still recognized the value of being together, just us gay brothers, and also the value that can be had by opening our circle from time to time to include other dear ones. The Billys now have some gatherings for Billys only, and some where we can invite our dear "Billy kin" to join us.

During the first few years of getting together, all the work of putting on gatherings was done by volunteers. Mainly Terry Brown was holding the office together, which was located in a back room in The Dragon's Lair, the import and handcrafts shop that Jackson and I owned. As the gatherings got bigger and more frequent, that task was becoming quite a commitment, and burnout was a real issue.

One night in 1993 I got a call from an exuberant Billy brother, Doug Murphy, who had the revelation that the Billy Club should form as a 501c3 non-profit corporation. He felt this would greatly benefit that which we do, and allow us to do and provide so much more. I, personally, had reservations regarding this shift towards what I perceived as developing a bureaucracy. At the same time I knew that, with volunteer burnout, the Billy Club could fade away. This new approach would draw a circle together to oversee the ongoing evolution of the Billys and, at that time, this seemed vital to its survival. I guessed it would depend on who stepped forward to be on the Board (would they see themselves as directors or as nurturing stewards?) and how connected to the community would they be?

Thus was formed The Billy Foundation with a Board of Directors using the consensus model of decision making. Throughout the ensuing history of the Billys, I have always been impressed with the heartfeltness of those who have volunteered to serve on the Billy Board of Directors. Their many contributions, to this day, are a core reason why The Billy Club is alive and kicking up its heels!

One of the avenues by which the Billy Board engaged the community was with the implementation of an Advisory Retreat. These were overnight two day retreats where invitations to attend were sent to Billys who were active in being

coordinators at the events or being on a committee, or some other participation. It was an attempt to provide a conduit for the Community to come together with the Board to advise and exchange ideas. At these retreats we looked at how the Billy Club was evolving. At an early retreat we came up with our first mission statement. After a couple of these retreats we recognized that, really, what we were doing together was fostering our future. To capture this sense the name was changed from “Advisory Retreat “ to “Visioning Retreat”.

It was about two years after the Board of Directors (BOD) formed that we passed through one of our crucibles as an organization/community. The Billy gatherings had always had a policy of no one turned away for lack of funds (NOTAFLOF). We were evolving with the fact that gatherings were no longer held on homesteads. . . we actually had to pay for venues. Plus, the cost of food and cooking and more was having an affect on our operating funds. It also seemed that the policy of “pay what you can” was evolving into “pay what you want to”. In other words, the income was down and the outgo was up, thus creating an imbalance that was sliding us into financial crisis.

The Board of Directors, seeing this, passed a directive that, from now on, one could only attend a gathering if one could afford the fee. The following gathering at Saratoga Springs was in an uproar over this handing down of a decree from the BOD changing a policy that had always been a core value throughout our history. It was felt that the community at large had not been notified that there was any financial problem, thereby not given the chance to come up with other, perhaps less drastic, solutions to this issue. In life, it’s often the case that a crisis sparks growth, and this was no exception.

Many things evolved from this crisis. A Visioning Retreat (our first by that name) was planned to come up with a solution to this dilemma. At that retreat the Scholarship policy was formed.

Among the values that became a giant “Aha!” for me at this retreat (so many “Aha!’s” have come to me through this journey with the Billys), was in the discussion of how Billys could contribute if they were low on funds. I thought it quite rational and fair that, if a Billy didn’t have money to contribute, he could contribute energy by working at the gathering. As this discussion deepened we all realized that this was setting up a class system wherein those who have less money become, to some degree, servants of those who have more. We decided to continue the policy of asking all gathering attendees to volunteer for gathering duties; that these duties be shared equally by all, regardless of what one can afford to pay. Indeed, the very word, community, derives from two Latin words: *com* (with), and *munitas* (tasks). That we are all equally responsible for the tasks of our coming together is what gives us a stronger feeling of being in community with one another.

We also implemented Advisory Circles to be held at every gathering as a regular conduit of communication between the Board and the Community so there would always be opportunities to tap into the wisdom of the community at large.

During the next gathering at Heartwood, the first advisory circle discussed the value of changing the language of “Billy Board of Directors” to “Billy Council”. It was felt that this more reflected how this circle operated and that it would draw a different energy from those involved. Rather than the feeling of directing the Billy Club as a hierarchy, they would feel drawn to work together in counsel with one another as part of the community rather than from without.

In 1996, we also saw the need for hired staff: an office manager (rather than having the Board micromanaging everything). The Board asked several original Billys to join them in the selection process. It was very hard to choose between the wonderful heartfelt Billy applicants, but Charlie Seltzer became our first Office Manager. After two fabulous years at the helm, Charlie was ready to move on to other things and we were faced with the hiring process again. From Charlie’s input about his experience, it seemed that “Resource Coordinator” was a more apt title for the position than was “Office Manager”. Scott Love then became our first “Resource Coordinator” in November of 1998. The efforts of the person who holds this responsibility is truly the ‘lube’ of this community. Thank you so much, Marcus (Borgman), for carrying on this vital work with such a good spirit and with such competence!

So where does one go in trying to capture the essence and evolution of the Billy Club? There are so many layers and so many stories. If we find that what we do together has value in our lives, may we feel open and free to talk about it amongst ourselves and with others. I feel the more we tell and hear our stories, the more possibility that we may find a way to define this value.

We are continuing to evolve as a community in a very uncertain world. I believe the world can use many of the values that our community embraces. I wonder how the Billys will evolve as we walk forward in our continuing history?

Ron Vanscoyk