

## FROM THE FIELD: CAPITAL REGION



*This From the Field Feature is courtesy of New York Folklore Community Field Worker, Edgar Betelu. He has over 25 years of experience as a public sector folklorist in New York State. A native of Argentina, he is a record producer and owner of Sunnyside/Circular Moves. Edgar is currently conducting fieldwork in the Capital District and Hudson Valley for the Upstate Regional Project. Since late 2021, he has been working with immigrant and refugee communities in the Capital Region. Photo courtesy of the author.*

New York's Capital Region and Upstate are home to an increasing number of Karen who have settled in the area since the 1990s, commonly, as refugees escaping political violence and persecution in Myanmar (previously called Burma). Thanks to immigration and refugee organizations today, it is estimated that around 5,000 Karen call Albany and the Capital Region home.

As part of my fieldwork in the region, I have had the opportunity to meet several members and artists of the Karen community. In August 2021, I was invited to the Wrist Tying Ceremony, which is held annually in different cities of New York State. Last year, the event took place in Rensselaer, New York, and was attended by members of large Karen communities from Utica, Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse, among others.

The annual Wrist Tying Ceremony is a centuries-old tradition that typically takes place in August. It is secular in nature and celebrates the cultural identity, tradition, and bonds within families and the Karen community. The ritual also serves as an expression and wish for the spiritual and physical well-being of a person.

During the event, elders of the community tie red and white threads around participants' wrists and place cooked sticky rice, sugarcane, leaves, and bananas in their hands, while reciting words calling on the spirits to act graciously, bring good health, and ward off evil.

Last year, the event was a wonderful and festive social gathering held in the field behind the Gethsemane Karen Baptist Church in Rensselaer. It was a hot summer day, and the rain threatened to spoil it, but fortunately only a few drops came down, and the sun finally came out. There were lots of people. Entire families, from grandparents to young children. Men and women walked around the grounds, sat to chat, laugh and eat. A group of men rolled betel nuts in leaves to chew. Everyone wore the traditional colorful *longyi*.

There was also lots of delicious food and cooking. Fish, vegetables, and several soups. I had a delicious bamboo soup with vegetables on top and shrimp. There were also dance groups and young children performing traditional Karen dances alongside musicians. I had the opportunity to meet Pinya Aung, a Tenaku harp player and his wife Ehsue Aung, who is a dancer. They are both very active in the community and one of the earliest families to arrive in the Capital region in the early 2000s. During the last two years, I have had the pleasure to continue to work with the community through presentations and workshops. In a couple of weeks, I have been invited to participate in a Karen Soccer tournament with teams from the Capital Region and other cities upstate. Happily, I was told I could participate with the elder teams. I am very much looking forward to the sporting event, although I believe I will be found closer to the food stands.

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This year the Wrist Tying Ceremony took place in Syracuse on September 3, 2022.



Karen Wrist Tying: Attendees at the Karen Wrist Tying Ceremony in 2021. Photo courtesy of Edgar Betelu.



## FROM THE FIELD: MOHAWK VALLEY



*This From the Field feature is courtesy of New York Folklore Staff Folklorist Anne Rappaport Berliner. She received her MA in Folk Studies from Western Kentucky University in 2018. Since late 2021, she has been working with beekeepers in the Mohawk Valley. Photo courtesy of the author.*

The Mohawk Valley has a rich history of beekeeping. Moses Quinby, an important figure in beekeeping history, lived and worked in the valley. Today, there are Mohawk Valley beekeepers carrying on the legacy. Many are members of the Southern Adirondack Beekeeper Association, an important group in the area. However, anyone who is anyone will tell you that Carl Jurica was the center of a tight knit beekeeping community.

Carl was a lifelong beekeeper in Johnstown, New York. He passed away just a few weeks after I interviewed him in October 2021. His legacy lives on through his mentees, students, friends, and of course, his bees. In addition to Carl's community, I recently started interviewing beekeepers in other parts of the Capital Region, "BEE" they backyard or commercial keepers. I have learned about bees themselves, and of course, tried lots of honey. The dark honey—called wildflower, produced by bees in the fall is my favorite.

If you spend more than a few minutes talking to a beekeeper, you will hear them talk about their "girls," aka the bees! Most

bees in a hive are female—no matter their job—nursing, gathering, or building. It is unlikely you will find keepers who don't talk to their "girls." Experienced beekeepers can tell how the hives feel based on their sound and behavior. Conversation between the bees and their keepers are common!

When a bee leaves their hive in search of food, it returns to its hive by recognizing the visual attributes of its home. Because of this, beekeepers often paint their hives bright colors. I have seen rainbows of hives as well as individual images. One of my favorite hives is in the keeper's home.

The bees naturally found their way into the house, and the keeper fitted the hive with glass cover so it can be viewed from the inside!

I'm hoping to continue expanding my interviews past the Mohawk Valley and into the greater Capital Region. I have been asked by many of the folks I meet if I'll ever keep bees, and though I'm not ready yet, I get the feeling it is just a matter of time. I do love honey!

*This From the Field feature was first published May 20, 2022, at <https://nyfolklore.org/from-the-field-mohawk-valley/>*



Bee Hives painted by Carl Jurica. Photo by Anne Rappaport Berliner.



Carl Jurica shows off a smoker, invented by Moses Quinby in the Mohawk Valley in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Photo by Anne Rappaport Berliner.



## FROM THE FIELD: ROCHESTER



*This From the Field Feature is courtesy of Hannah Davis, the founding director of Flower City Folk and a professor of practice in the Rochester Institute of Technology's School of Individualized Study. Learn more about this project's progress on Instagram at @flowercityfolk and Facebook at [www.facebook.com/flowercityfolk](http://www.facebook.com/flowercityfolk). Photo courtesy of the author.*

Downtown Rochester is undergoing major changes, and Monroe County's new folklife program, Flower City Folk, is documenting the process.

Since 2014, local government has worked toward removing the Inner Loop, a sunken highway encircling our urban center. When it was constructed, this roadway created a physical divide between bustling residential neighborhoods and the stores, businesses, restaurants, and schools that local community members relied on. Now, community members are working to reunite those spaces.

The development is happening slowly, quadrant by quadrant. Its southernmost quadrant, where ground broke in 2014, now features a major expansion of the Strong Museum, several new apartment buildings, and improved infrastructure for cyclists and pedestrians. These changes bring a mix of praise and ire from community members. Some appreciate these glossy updates; others are dismayed by their exclusivity. The apartments are too expensive for the people who most need

additional housing options, they say. "Who asked for that?" someone wondered aloud to me.

The next stage of redevelopment will happen in nearby South Marketview Heights. Hinge Neighbors, an organization founded by artist Shawn Dunwoody and activist Suzanne Mayer, is trying to ensure that this stage is more collaborative and community-oriented. To document community members' experiences and desires, as well as the neighborhood itself, Hinge Neighbors contracted a cultural resource survey from The Landmark Society of Western New York and Flower City Folk. We've been specifically tasked with conducting oral history interviews.

In the year and a half that's passed since we began this work, I've met with dozens of people to discuss their experiences. Opinions differ, but everyone speaks with fondness about this special place. They recall growing up with yards full of fruit trees, working and going to school with close friends and family, and delighting in the small joys that a close community offers its members—like congregating at a local bakery's backdoor with friends in hopes of getting a free cookie. They

also agree that construction of the Inner Loop, compounded by economic decline in the '70s and '80s, changed the neighborhood. This redevelopment, they say, is an opportunity to make things right.

Official plans for redevelopment are still in flux, but we're honored to collaborate with community members to bring about positive change.

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community scholar?

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"From the Field."

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to be featured.



Hannah Davis interviews Tony Apollonio, a longtime resident of South Marketview Heights, as a part of an ongoing effort to document the stories and experiences of community members affected by the development of the Inner Loop. Photo by Arturo Hoyte.