Rafael Hernández and the Harlem Hellfighters

Pete Seeger in Song and Art

Hermanos y Amigos de Guatemala

The Seven Trees & Ramapough Ethnicity

Storytelling Art: “Dead Man’s Liver”

Steppers with Class
From the Editor

The Public Programs Section of the American Folklore Society (AFS) recently launched an “Advocacy Tool Kit,” designed to assist folklorists and their colleagues to better advocate for themselves and the field of folklore and folk culture. The development of this advocacy plan, presented at the 2014 AFS Conference in Santa Fe, New Mexico, was the Public Programs Section’s response to a perceived lack of readiness by folklorists to move into action when public folklore programs became threatened by external policies and funding cuts. While noting that folklorists frequently serve as advocates for the cultures, people, and communities with whom they work, folklorists’ efforts at influencing policymakers and the public as to the value of folk culture, traditional arts, and cultural conservation have sometimes been less successful.

In New York State, advocacy has been an important part of public folklore scholarship. New York Folklore Society founder and historian, Louis C. Jones, who became head of the New York State Historical Association (NYSHA) in 1946 and, at the same time, progenitor of NYFS, did much to further folklore scholarship in New York. Under Jones’ direction, the folk art collection at the Fenimore House Museum in Cooperstown had its inception, and by 1948, the "Seminars on American Culture" became part of programming at NYSHA, presenting all aspects of folk culture and NY history to attentive audiences. Jones advocated strongly for the inception of the Cooperstown Graduate Programs in the early 1960s, and when it became a graduate program of the State University of New York at Oneonta, this program supported two academic tracks, one of which was the study of American Folk Culture. This important program advanced scholarly study of folklore, serving as the training ground for many distinguished folklorists.

Certainly, folklorists have frequently championed support for folk arts in New York. The successful formation of the Folk Arts Program of the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) resulted from a groundswell of citizen support in the early 1980s. Continued advocacy for Folk Arts as part of NYSCA is necessary, and advocacy is ongoing to continue to emphasize the importance of the arts for the cultural life of the state. Similarly, ongoing advocacy is needed for support for the "Endowments"—the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities—especially during times of particularly drastic federal fiscal belt-tightening. Folklorists and other champions of traditional culture continue to highlight the particularities of community expressions and folk culture within the many diverse communities in New York, finding allies wherever they can be found. Consummate activist Archie Green summed it up: “In using plain speech to communicate with others inside and outside our professions, we undergird analysis, advance action, and step into coalitions.” As we look to the future and ever-changing political landscapes, folk culture will be best served by multiple players, trumpeting an understanding of the importance of New York’s cultural diversity and the importance of traditional culture to the health and well being of all New Yorkers.

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continued on page 2

From the Director

"When the time of year comes round with sap rising and snow melting, there is an insistent urge to take one’s part in the process—to tap the trees, to gather the sap, to boil out the sweet syrup of the maple."

Features

3 Rafael Hernández and the Puerto Rican Legacy of the 369th Regiment’s Harlem Hellfighters
   by Elena Martínez

14 Hermanos y Amigos de Guatemala: Folklore as Strategy for Cultural Survival
   by Tom Van Buren

19 A Song For Pete Seeger
   by Joe Stead

20 America’s Last True Folk Hero
   by Michael D’Antuono

22 Irv and Fran Shapiro Folk Music Library
   by Maureen Dye

26 The Seven Trees and Ramapough Ethnicity
   by Gary Van Valen

32 “Dead Man’s Liver”— A Jump Tale
   Collected, retold, and arranged for performance by Tim Jennings

44 Steppers with Class
   by Zoe van Buren

Departments and Columns

13 Good Spirits
   by Libby Tucker

24 Downstate
   by Steve Zeitlin

38 ALN8BAL8MO: A Native Voice
   by Joseph Bruchac

40 Upstate
   by Varick A. Chittenden

42 Voices in New York
   by Sylvain Leroux

From the Editor (continued)

water for every gallon of maple syrup. The Abenaki say that this sweet treat once dripped from the trees, available any time of the year with no work required. But people got lazy and unappreciative of this free gift, so the Creator diluted the syrup to a watery sap, making the people work for this sweet staple (see story insert on p. 31).

Indeed, these days its takes time and energy to produce this gift of nature. Wood fires are often used to boil down the sap, and it takes a lot of wood. A cord of firewood will be burned for every 25 gallons of pure maple syrup. That’s a stack of wood 8 feet long, 4 feet wide, and 4 feet high.

Mountains of firewood and the sugar shacks—with their telltale open cupola in the peak of the roof to let out the steam—are evidence of this work. Looking closely at the landscape, you find more evidence of sugaring. Covered galvanized buckets and horse-drawn sleds have mostly replaced bark containers or wooden buckets with carrying yokes. Very often, plastic tubing, shaded blue, crisscrosses from tree to tree down to a collection point—sometimes the sugar shack, sometimes barrels (of metal or blue plastic), or reused stainless steel milk house tanks. Maple trees along the road, decorated with repurposed plastic gallon milk jugs, might point to a small backyard setup.

Nonetheless, whatever the setup and equipment, sugaring is in the blood. Many local farm families, like the Campbells of Mapleland Farms, have been sugaring for at least four generations to add to the income of their dairy and potato businesses. Others are new to the tradition—“backyard producers”—like my younger brother who boils enough for a year’s supply of pure maple syrup, stored in quart canning jars for his family’s pancakes, to give away as special gifts, and to sweeten his morning coffee.

Eight gallons of syrup can be condensed into a pound of maple sugar. Once used as a homemade substitute for cane sugar, maple sugar and maple syrup have been mainstays of North Country cooking, found in local recipes for maple-glazed ham, maple Johnnycake (see recipe on p. 31), maple-sweetened baked beans, candied popcorn, dumplings in maple syrup, maple frosting, maple sugar pie, just to name a few.

One of my fondest memories from my first years as a folklorist in the Adirondacks was my visit to Athol’s Jack Wax Party, an annual fundraiser for the American Cancer Society. This event continues to attract a large following, starting off with a supper of homemade savory dishes, not unlike the church suppers that I experienced as a child. However, as good as the food is, everyone is there for dessert: pure maple syrup cooked on the industrial stove and ladled onto snow, apportioned into individual paper bowls. The quickly cooled, cooked syrup forms into a taffy-like dessert, called Jack Wax or Sugar on Snow. With a twirl of a fork you eat it as is, possibly with a sour pickle chaser to cut the sweet and allow you to eat more. The year I was there was a rare year when the organizers had to travel north to Indian Lake to bring back snow for the event.

Closer to home, I like to visit the Upper Hudson New York Maple Producers’ booth at the Washington County Fair in August, to indulge in another maple treat: cotton candy spun from pure maple sugar. Not to be missed. Trust me. The same folk celebrate, in season, with an annual Maple Weekend, inviting the public to an open house and self-guided tour in March, to visit and learn about this local product from a number of their neighbors who make it each year. Many visitors use the map to tour the countryside, visit the sugar shacks, see the trees being tapped, taste samples, maybe indulge in a pancake breakfast, and yes, buy a gallon or two of New York maple syrup.

These days, kids are all in college or beyond. Yet they cannot understand anyone’s interest in “maple-like” substitute “pancake syrups,” featuring less than two percent real maple syrup—a mostly corn syrup product with added color and flavor. They suffer from the lack of a sweet, soothing syrup flavor.

...continued on page 31
Over a decade ago, I became interested in the story of the Puerto Rican musicians and the World War I Harlem Hellfighters Regimental Band and their influence on jazz music, after finding scholar Ruth Glasser’s extraordinary book, My Music is My Flag, in a Smithsonian Museum bookshop and then viewing the exhibit, RAICES: The Roots of Latin Music, curated by Louis Bauzó and Roberta Singer at the Museum of the City of New York. It was such an incredible story that I was surprised I hadn’t heard about it elsewhere.

I found that in some circles the African American component of this history was well known, but the Puerto Rican history was either ignored or disregarded, which is a shame because it adds another layer to an already fascinating tale. For instance, in Ken Burns’ serial documentary, Jazz, during the episode recounting the story of the Harlem Hellfighters, never once were the roles played by the 18 Puerto Ricans mentioned. It is especially disturbing, because one of the Puerto Rican musicians was a young Rafael Hernández, who would become Puerto Rico’s—and Latin America’s—greatest composer. I think this exclusion reflects a tendency to look at different issues, cultural or social, in terms of either Black or White, and musically speaking, this leaves out Latinos or relegates them to ethnic genres such as salsa and norteño. Ethnomusicologist Deborah Pacini Hernández has commented how numerous scholars “…have begun breaking down such essentialist notions by providing more complex and nuanced views of the musical practices of Latinos, demonstrating that for decades they have engaged extensively with US mainstream popular musical styles” (Pacini Hernández 2000, 71). So, in search of this history and to pay homage to those rarely mentioned musicians, I have delved, along with musician Bobby Sanabria, into the Hellfighter’s Latino past to find ways to bring this story to light.

Rafael Hernández—Beginnings

Rafael Hernández was born October 24, 1891, in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico, to Afro-Puerto Rican tobacco workers. His grandmother inspired him and his three siblings, Victoria, Rosa Elvira, and Jesús (Pocholo), to take an interest in music. Rafael learned the cornet, trombone, bombardino (small concert tuba known as a euphonium), guitar, violin, and piano. Jesús played clarinet, and Victoria was an accomplished violinist, cellist, and pianist. Not surprisingly, the siblings came from the town that has been called “El pueblo donde hasta las piedras cantan” (“The town where even the rocks sing”).

Rafael’s professional musical career started in 1914, when a Japanese circus, El Circo Kawamura, passed through his hometown on a tour of Latin America. The Kawamura Brothers had heard of Hernández’s musical abilities and hired him to tour the island with them. Upon arriving in San Juan, Rafael made connections and began playing in various bands including the banda municipal (the municipal band), which was directed by Manuel Tizol (the uncle of valve trombonist Juan Tizol, who would later play in Duke Ellington’s band and compose jazz standards such as Caravan), as well as playing violin in the Orquesta Sinfónica. It was at this time that Rafael began writing and composing songs in earnest.

James Reese Europe

In 1917, 26-year-old Rafael met the renowned African American bandleader James Reese Europe. This meeting drastically

Filmmaker Ken Burns has had a less than stellar history documenting Latinos. His 18-hour documentary, Baseball (1994), featured six minutes on Latinos, at a time when, although with less representation than today, Latinos still made up 20 percent of the players (Castro 2013). Latinos have been a part of jazz’s history since its beginnings in New Orleans, but the 2001 Jazz serial was 19 hours and had less than four minutes devoted to Latin jazz (Alvear 2007; Gonzalez 2007); and his The War (2007), about World War II, didn’t feature any Latinos, although a half million served in that war, and 13 were awarded Medals of Honor. This prompted the group Defend the Honor to protest, and Burns eventually tacked on some segments about Latino and Native American service in that war.
changed Rafael’s life and brought him into contact with people and events that would make musical history. James Reese Europe was a highly regarded bandleader in New York City. In 1910, he had founded the Clef Club in Harlem, which functioned as a union and booking agency for African American musicians who were ignored by the American Federation of Musicians. In 1912, Europe started an orchestra of over 100 musicians, and the following year the orchestra was the first Black group to play Carnegie Hall. Europe’s prowess as a bandleader and conductor was later established with mainstream audiences, when he became the musical director for Irene and Vernon Castle, the dance partners who were responsible for igniting the tango craze in the United States prior to World War I, in what was North America’s first love affair with Latin music and dance.

As the US was about to enter World War I, Europe signed up for service and became part of the 15th Infantry Regiment of the New York National Guard (on June 2, 1913, the governor of New York signed a bill that authorized the creation of the regiment, which was New York’s first Black National Guardsman troop, and on June 16, 1916, the regiment was formed). Though it was a Black regiment, it had a white commander, Colonel William Hayward, who was a military music enthusiast. Hayward’s dream was to have a regimental band that would bring prestige to the regiment, as “the best damn brass band in the United States Army.” Europe, a lieutenant, was assigned to assemble and direct this band. It included Harlem dancer Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, who together with Noble Sissle (he would later gain fame as a jazz composer) were assigned as drum majors; Charles “Lucky” Roberts, the stride piano player who had occasionally played in Europe’s Clef Club Orchestra for the Castles; and Buddy Gilmore, who was recognized as one of the first jazz drummers in the modern sense. Other notables in the regiment included the baseball player Spottswood Poles of the New York Lincoln Giants and the popular vaudeville star Bert Williams. Williams served as captain and inspector of small arms with the 15th Regiment during their recruitment period in New York before they left for active duty, but according to his biography, “Not yet an American citizen—he would be naturalized in 1918—he would remain in the States” (his family had immigrated from the Bahamas) (Forbes 2008, 271). This shouldn’t have made a difference, because during WWI 18 percent—almost 1 in 5—soldiers were immigrants. The US Army was not prepared to enter a major war (at the time, its armed forces were ranked 17th in the world), and everyone was needed. On May 9, 1918, Congress passed an amendment to the naturalization laws so that non-citizen soldiers who served in the war would become citizens without the five-year residency previously required (Laskin 2010, 167). There were so many immigrant soldiers that the Military Intelligence Section established the Foreign-speaking Soldier Section (Ford 2001, 13). After the war, 280,000 immigrant soldiers became US citizens, because they had served in the armed forces.

An infantry band normally consisted of 28 individuals, but for the music that he wanted to play, Europe felt that the minimum wouldn’t work, and due to his standing in the musical community, he was permitted to recruit 40 musicians. At one point, the regimental band reached 65 musicians, but most were not actual soldiers, and many were unwilling to enlist. In addition, Europe had recruited Black musicians from around the United States, but after some rehearsals, Europe realized the clarinet section was weak. He needed these players on short notice, and they had to meet three requirements: they had to read music well, be disciplined, and most importantly, had to be Black.

**Puerto Rico**

Europe traveled to Puerto Rico where he recruited 18 Afro-Puerto Ricans from the island’s municipal bands. How did Europe know he could find well-trained musicians on the tiny island of Puerto Rico? There are a few possible reasons. The respected Puerto Rican bass and tuba player, Rafael Escudero had played in Europe’s Clef Club Orchestra, and there were also Puerto Rican musicians in Europe’s Syncopated Society Orchestra, which played for the Castles, so Europe would have been familiar with the quality of musicians from Puerto Rico (Thompson and Moreno de Schwartz 2008, 3). The Victor Talking Machine Company had been in San Juan in early 1917 on a recording tour through Latin America, and Manuel Tizol’s band (whom Rafael Hernández had played for in San Juan) had recorded for them. Europe also recorded with Victor, so through the record label, he would have been aware of Tizol and the musicians who performed with him (Glasser 1995, 55). Tizol was known on the music scene in New York, because he regularly contracted orchestras from New York to play in San Juan. In fact, he likely had preselected some potential musicians for Europe prior to Europe’s visit to the island; therefore, Rafael would certainly have been on the list of candidates (Thompson and Moreno de Schwartz 2008, 4).

The multitalented Rafael Hernández played trombone for the regimental band, an important instrument in military and early jazz bands. His musical talent was noticed, as the regiment’s trombone section “was the outstanding feature of the band” (Gracyk 1996, 26). Other musicians who were recruited from Puerto Rico included clarinetists Jesús Hernández, Rafael’s brother, Rafael Duchesne Mondríguez, who also played with Manuel Tizol’s municipal band in San Juan and came from a leading musical family on the island; and Gregorio Felix, who would play with Fess Williams and his Royal Flush Orchestra for the grand opening of the Savoy Ballroom in 1926 (Serrano 2012, 260–262).

The reason there were many well-trained musicians of African ancestry on the island, in large part, comes from the tradition of the *bandas municipales* common throughout Latin America. These bands were modeled after military bands and would play in the main square or plaza of a
Every source lists a different number of recruits from Puerto Rico. Noble Sissle’s memoir states Europe “enlisted fifteen of the best Porto Rican musicians” (Sissle 1942, 51); a document from the James Reese Europe Collection at the Schomburg Manuscript Collection lists 18 musicians; and the ship manifests on the Ellis Island Passenger Search, www.ellisisland.org, also lists 18 musicians arriving on at least three different ships, but a couple of names are different from the document in the Schomburg collection. According to the Ellis Island passenger manifests, they came in three groups to New York. The first group came onboard the SS Caracas, along with Europe, on May 5, 1917, and were enlisted the same day they arrived in New York City on May 11. The second group included Rafael Hernández and his brother, along with Eligio Rijos, and they arrived July 23. The last group had Duchesne (the nephew), Cruz, and Sánchez and arrived on August 6 aboard the SS Brazos. In this last group, not all the names coincide with the list below, and one from the list, Ramón Hernández, has an enlistment date when the regiment would have already been en route to Europe.

The 18 Puerto Rican Harlem Hellfighters are listed here (James Reese Europe Collection, 1847–1996, Box 1, Folder 1):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Service No.</th>
<th>Enlistment Date</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rafael Hernández</td>
<td>102827</td>
<td>May 11, 1917</td>
<td>Band SGT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rafael Duchesne</td>
<td>102824</td>
<td>May 11, 1917</td>
<td>Musc 1st CL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antonio Gonzales</td>
<td>102825</td>
<td>May 11, 1917</td>
<td>Musc 1st CL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severino Hernández</td>
<td>102828</td>
<td>May 11, 1917</td>
<td>Musc 2nd CL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligio Rijos</td>
<td>102829</td>
<td>July 24, 1917</td>
<td>Musc 2nd CL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gregorio Feliz</td>
<td>102835</td>
<td>May 11, 1917</td>
<td>Musc 1st CL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesús Hernández</td>
<td>102837</td>
<td>July 25, 1917</td>
<td>Musc 1st CL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiminez Froylan</td>
<td>102838</td>
<td>May 1, 1917</td>
<td>Musc 3rd CL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elenterio Melendez</td>
<td>102839</td>
<td>May 11, 1917</td>
<td>Musc 2nd CL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicholas Vasquez</td>
<td>102841</td>
<td>May 11, 1917</td>
<td>Musc 2nd CL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(He is listed a second time as Nicholas Vasquese, but has same Service Number)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>José Rosa</td>
<td>102840</td>
<td>May 11, 1917</td>
<td>Musc 2nd CL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janero Torres</td>
<td>102846</td>
<td>May 11, 1917</td>
<td>Musc 2nd CL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonardo Cruz</td>
<td>102834</td>
<td>August 12, 1917</td>
<td>Band SGT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pablo Fuentes</td>
<td>102817</td>
<td>May 11, 1917</td>
<td>Band Corporal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arturo B. Ayala</td>
<td>104496</td>
<td>May 11, 1917</td>
<td>Musc 3rd CL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixto Benites</td>
<td>DOB Oct. 1898</td>
<td>May 11, 1917</td>
<td>Musc 3rd CL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramón M. Hernández</td>
<td>1768060</td>
<td>February 13, 1918</td>
<td>Musc 2nd CL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angel Carrión</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>June 5, 1917</td>
<td>Pvt.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tim Gracyk (1996), in his liner notes, has tried to reconstruct the band and has come up with the following:

- Trombone: Rafael Hernández
- Clarinet: Rafael Duchesne, Antonio Gonzales, Gregorio Felix Delgado, Genaro Torres, Eligio Rijos, Jesús Hernández, Arturo B. Ayala
- Saxophone: Ceferino Hernández
- Bassoon: Pablo Fuentes
- Mellophone: Francisco Meléndez, Eleuterio Meléndez
- Baritone Horns: Nicolás Vazquez, Froilan Jiménez
- Tuba: José Rivera Rosas, Sixto Benitez

Puerto Rican Harlem Hellfighters
town (the Church and the military provided most aspects of public music in the 19th-century Spanish Caribbean). In this way the regimental bands helped to disseminate popular, contemporary styles of music to the public. Most local communities didn’t have all the necessary personnel to form a complete band, so until the 1880s gaps in the personnel were filled by military band members, especially in the bigger municipalities of San Juan and Ponce, where these musicians would later become active as local educators as well. These changes would consolidate the disciplined European military aesthetic with the local sound (Díaz Díaz 2008, 235). Many of the Puerto Rican musicians who were part of James Reese Europe’s regimental band started their careers in municipal bands on the island. Due to this training, they brought with them important skills, which made them invaluable to Europe.

Their training was rigorous, and they spent many years learning music theory and solfeo—the ability to sight sing written music. They could read music on an extremely high level and play several instruments (Glasser 1995, 35). This gave them a step up over many African American musicians who, due to Jim Crow segregation laws in the United States, did not have access to music education and the instruments, specifically the expensive ones like brass instruments. In the US, they also had to work within segregated circuits: “With the lines between classical and popular music more strictly drawn in the United States, did not have access to music education and the instruments, specifically the expensive ones like brass instruments. 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World War I

So 18 musicians from Puerto Rico sailed to New York and were enlisted in the 15th Infantry Regiment. In his memoirs, Noble Sissle recounts the obstacles encountered by them, such as a radically different climate and a language barrier, but musically, they continued to shine. During its training period, the regimental band played a concert at the Manhattan Casino, and a review in The New York Age by critic Lester Walton stated, the “dozen or more Porto Ricans who made up the reed section they cannot be excelled”(Sissle 1942, 6); and Charles Welton, in a 1919 article in The World Magazine, pointed out some of the outstanding musicians, mentioning by name Elige [aɪ] Rijos, on clarinet and the versatile Raphael [ɾaβə] Hernández on baritone sax.

In the summer of 1917, National Guard troops were mustered into federal service, and in early 1918, the regiment sailed for France and became the first African American military unit to ever land in Europe (Harris 2003, 152). Yet in all their experiences that led to their going to fight on the European front, the men of the regiment experienced racism. One such incident occurred when Colonel Hayward asked to have the 15th included in the Rainbow Division (Guard units from 27 states) for the farewell parade down Fifth Avenue in New York City. He was told the Regiment could not join the parade because, “Black is not a color of the rainbow” (Nelson 2009, 31). Jim Crow followed them to France. Under orders from General John Pershing, the commander of the US forces, and following the War Department’s segregation policy, Blacks were not allowed to fight with the white US Army. In fact, many African Americans worked in the Services of Supply when they arrived in France and were harassed by officers, fellow soldiers, and military police (Sammons and Morrow 2014, 214). Pershing, however, had heard of Europe’s musical reputation, and as soon as they landed, he had them transferred to his headquarters to entertain the officers (Shack 2001, 18). As there were not enough Black regiments to form their own division, the 15th Infantry was “temporarily detached” from the US Army and put under the command of the French army as part of its 16th Division (Pershing had “lent” the 27th and 30th Divisions to the British, but they retained their identity as part of the fighting forces of the US Army) (Laskin 2010, 228). They were now called the 369th US Infantry Regiment (369 ème Régiment d’Infanterie US) and were the only American regiment with the French army. In March 1918, they had started training with the French army, and they now wore some of the accoutrements of the French army—blue helmets of the French Infantry (which were later replaced with American helmets), leather belts and pouches, and French Lebel rifles with bayonets. Colonel Hayward
was not happy with this decision, but he described the unit under his command in a letter at this juncture:

Brother Boche [the German army] doesn’t know who we are yet, as none of my men have been captured so far, and the boys wear a French blue uniform when they go on raids. I’ve been thinking that if they capture one of my Porto Ricans (of whom I have a few) in the uniform of a Normandy French regiment and this black man tells them in Spanish that he is an American soldier in a New York National Guard regiment, it’s going to give the German intelligence department a headache trying to figure it out (Scott 1919, 206–207).

Ironically, the first Black US soldiers to engage in combat did so while serving in the French army (Sammons and Morrow 2014, 76). The regiment soon gained the name “Hellfighters” for their prowess in battle and became one of the most decorated on the European Front, even earning the French Croix de Guerre.

Before the regiment was sent to the front, Noble Sissle recounts the band’s duties once in France:

At daybreak every morning the entire regiment would be awakened by the martial strains of our band as the members stumbled along the street in semi-daylight, playing a good ragtime tune to try to cheer the boys up before they departed for their day’s drudgery. In the evening, if weather conditions permitted, the band would meet the returning boys from the road and march them back to camp. After supper they would play a concert on the drill field. In this way, they played a very important part in getting the spirits up … (Sissle 1942, 113).

The musicians in the regimental band did not actually fight because, customarily, band members act as stretcher-bearers in the Ambulance Corps (though this did not lessen their danger, as it often put them on the front lines). Rafael (who had become a sergeant in the band) remembered “running from trench to trench offering help to the wounded more than playing music” (Javaríz, quoted in Glasser 1995, 63). But the band (by this time in France, it was comprised of 44 members) gained its own recognition, credited with introducing proto-jazz and ragtime to the European continent. The music that heralded jazz had probably been played in Paris before, but the 369th Regiment band introduced this music to the French working class (Harris 2003, 155). In 1917, the band played in 25 French cities, performing for both French civilians and Allied soldiers who were at first astonished and then entranced by the music they heard. It was basically ragtime music adapted and performed for a marching band and not what came to be known as “jazz.” They didn’t improvise, which is a major feature of jazz, but the music contained many jazz-like elements such as “breaks, riffs, and trombone smears” (Ward and Burns 2000, 68). How were the musicians received in France? Noble Sissle is quoted in the St. Louis Post Dispatch on June 10, 1918, as describing what happened when the audiences heard the music:

[They] could stand it no longer; the “Jazz germ” hit them…. “There now,” I said to myself. “Colonel Hayward has brought his band over here and started ragtimitis in France; ain’t this an awful thing to visit upon a nation with so many burdens?” But when the band finished and the people were roaring with laughter, their faces wreathed in smiles, I was forced to say that this is just what France needed at this critical
moment. . . . All through France the same thing happened. Troop trains carrying Allied soldiers from everywhere passed us en route, and every head came out of the window when we struck up a good old Dixie tune. Even German prisoners forgot they were prisoners, dropped their work to listen and pat their feet to the stirring American tunes. . . . Who would think that little U.S.A. would ever give to the world a rhythm and melodies that, in the midst of universal sorrow, would cause all students of music to yearn to learn how to play it? Such is the case, because every musician we meet—and they all seem to be masters of their instruments—are always asking the boys to teach them how to play ragtime. I sometimes think if the Kaiser ever heard a good syncopated melody he would not take himself so seriously (Gracyk 1996).

After serving 10 months in France and 191 days under fire—the longest time spent by any US regiment during the war (Badger 1986, 36; Harris 2003, 185), the 369th US Infantry Regiment triumphantly returned to the United States as the most decorated US combat unit in WWI. On February 17, 1919, they were the first African Americans ever to lead the parade down Fifth Avenue, led by Drum Major “Bojangles” Robinson (Shack 2001, 20). Many of the musicians quit the army right away, so they could perform as a smaller version of the 369th US Infantry band. They recorded for the Pathé label in May 1919, and toured briefly until James Reese Europe was fatally stabbed by one of his drummers, following a concert in Boston. After this unfortunate tragedy, the group disbanded, and the musicians struck out on their own. Although the register for the recordings has been lost, historian Reid Badger writes that some of the Puerto Rican musicians were involved, including Rafael, his brother, Jesús, Eligio Ríos, Antonio González, and Arturo Ayala (Badger 1986, 237). Of the four trombonists on the recording sessions, one was likely Rafael. Tim Gracyk, writing about the recordings, comments, “One solo moment deserves our special attention. It is the trombone break at the end of ‘Memphis Blues.’ These two swift bars reveal a melodic swinging improviser who is fully in command of his horn” (Gracyk 1996, 28). Could this have been Rafael?

James Reese Europe’s decision to bring musicians back from Puerto Rico, many of whom would settle in New York City after the war, would change the face of New York’s and Latin America’s music scene forever (and Paris, too, as French audiences in the Montmartre quarter were soon eager to hear and see Black performers, such as Josephine Baker, Sidney Bechet, and Paul Robeson). Europe’s cultural importance cannot be overstated, as many credit him as one of the initiators of the subsequent Harlem Renaissance. Due to the regimental band’s success, bands with Black musicians became a regular feature on Broadway, and this opened doors for many other Puerto Rican musicians such as Moncho Usera and...
Augusto Coen; and it led to Rafael settling in New York City for a short time.

**Rafael’s Musical Career in New York, Cuba, and Mexico**

I will briefly outline Rafael’s musical trajectory, because it is incredible that for one whose music remains so influential throughout the entire Western Hemisphere, many times he doesn’t even garner a footnote in the regimental band’s story. Between the two World Wars, as New York’s Puerto Rican community was rapidly growing, New York was becoming the world’s capital for all things related to the music industry: recording, sheet music, piano rolls, and radio. The late 1920s and early 1930s also saw the rise of theater shows, movies, and variety shows organized by professional promoters. Puerto Rican musicians found a welcoming environment in which to make their own music—*plena, danza, visí, aiguañalbo*—as well as work in the many Cuban ensembles gaining popularity.


Into this milieu in February 1919, Rafael settled in New York City. He soon found work with the Harlem stride pianist Lucky Roberts (a fellow comrade in the 369th). In 1921, he was offered the job to direct the orchestra of the Teatro Fausto in Havana and went to Cuba. There, he composed songs that would become part of his celebrated repertoire, such as “Capullito de aleli” and the *guaracha* entitled “Cachita.” The latter is an example of the universality of his music, as Rafael didn’t limit his songs to Puerto Rican themes only: “Cachita” has many associations with Cuba (the title is the nickname for the Virgin of Charity (*La Caridad del Cobre*), the patron saint of Cuba, who is also associated with the West African deity Ochún in the Yoruba religion known as *Santería* from Cuba).

By 1925, Rafael was back in New York City and soon organized his own trio—which included the legendary Manuel “Canario” Jiménez (the famed *plena* singer). He called it Trio Borinquen, after the indigenous name for the island of Puerto Rico. In 1927, Rafael started a music store with his sister Victoria. According to Victoria, it was the first Puerto Rican-owned music store in New York City, “Yo fui la primera puertorriqueña que puse un negocio de discos de música... la única tienda de música puertorriqueña” / I was the first Puerto Rican woman that owned a music business... the only store of Puerto Rican music (Interview with Glasser, March 21, 1989).

To accommodate her growing business, Bartolo Alvarez, musician and founder of the Casa Latina music store, remembers: “Victoria moved the store from there because she had a very small store, and she had a piano in the back because she was a music teacher. She moved to a bigger store at 1724 Madison Avenue” (Interview with Martínez 2001). Legend has it that the song “Lamento borincano,” considered to be Rafael’s most famous work, was created there. Composed during the Great Depression, “Lamento borincano” related the tribulations of a poor jíbaro (peasant farmer in Puerto Rico). People here in the US, in Puerto Rico, and throughout Latin America related to the economic hardship described in its verses.

Rafael started a band called Cuarteto Victoria, named in honor of his sister. During this time Puerto Rican musicians, based in New York City, composed some of the songs that are now considered standards in the repertoire of Latin American popular music and have become unofficial anthems among the Puerto Rican community, such as “Lamento borincano” by Hernández and “Sin bandera” by Pedro Flores. Music historian Jorge Javaríz comments upon their music:

> The bulk of what we call popular Puerto Rican music was written and recorded in New York. Puerto Rico is the only Latin American country whose popular music was mainly created on foreign soil. The curious thing about this phenomenon is that it was precisely in those years that the popular Puerto Rican song became more Puerto Rican than it has ever been before or since (Glasser 1995, 90).

At this time, Rafael was traveling back and forth between New York City and Mexico City. In 1935, Rafael was in Mexico, and during this time he composed many more of his most famous songs, such as “El camanchero,” “Amor ciego,” and “Noche y día.” He also worked in Mexican cinema during its “Golden Age,” providing music for many films and appearing in some alongside Mexican comedian, Cantinflas.

Going back to New York City, he hired new vocalists who would later become major stars in Latin music: Bobby Capó to replace Davilita, and Myrta Silva (who would later sing for Sonora Matancera in Cuba, enjoying such great popularity there that when she left, many were skeptical of the singer who replaced her, a young unknown named Celia Cruz).

Meanwhile in 1939, Rafael and Victoria sold the store to Julio Cuevas, and the siblings moved to Mexico. After a failed business venture, Victoria moved back to New York alone and settled in the Bronx in 1940; the following year, she opened Casa Hernández at 786 Prospect Avenue on the first floor of the Manhanset Building, where she continued to sell music and clothes (her early work in New York had been as a seamstress) and to give piano lessons. She lived on the third floor of this apartment building, and when Rafael visited New York, he would stay there.

In 1947, he settled in Puerto Rico where he lived the remainder of his life. He passed away on December 11, 1965, in the Puerto Nuevo Hospital de Veteranos de San Patricio. Of the many renowned composers in Latin America, he is among the top three, with Agustín Lara (Mexico) and Ernesto Lecuona (Cuba). Of the three, Rafael was the most prolific with more than 2,000 songs, as well as the most versatile, composing songs in the Puerto Rican styles of the *plena* and *danza*, Spanish *zargüelas*, as well as the Cuban genres of *bolero, guarachas, son*, and *rumba* (Díaz Ayala 2000, 244).

In 1969, Victoria’s store in the Bronx was bought by the composer/musician Mike Amadeo who still owns it today. Today the store’s awning reads “Casa Amadeo, *antígua*...”
music, a cultural expression that developed here, yet has eclipsed its New York City origins to become one of this century’s most influential popular genres of music. And, the store’s historical trajectory began when a young musician, Rafael Hernández, musically trained in the island’s tradition of *bandas municipales*, decided to enlist in an extraordinary regimental band.

**The 369th and Rafael’s Legacy Today**

One of the first steps that Bobby Sanabria and I took to learn about the history of the regimental band was to visit the 369th Historical Society located at the regiment’s landmarked armory at 142nd Street and Fifth Avenue along the Harlem River Drive. We viewed their historical displays of the regiment and noticed there was no mention of the Puerto Rican involvement in WWI. We began to look for funding to create various projects, such as an exhibit or a concert. This research has led us in other directions as well. Last year, City Lore began digitizing the remaining sheet music from the regiment, which dates from the first half of the 20th century; and in November 2013, on the first day of Puerto Rican Heritage Month, at Hostos Community College (right across the 145th Street Bridge from the armory), Bobby Sanabria’s Multiverse Big Band played a concert in honor of Rafael Hernández and his legacy in the 369th
Regiment. Thanks to a friend in the Army Reserves who put me in touch with the Army’s office for military bands, we were able to get the 319th Army Band, based in Fort Totten, Queens, to open the concert. And incredibly, the new director of the band, Chief Warrant Officer 3 Luis Santiago Sierra had just arrived from Puerto Rico and was excited to take part in a concert honoring Hernández (the 319th were given a couple of the scores for the concert from the digitized historical materials but, unfortunately, were unable to rehearse any new material due to the government shutdown that occurred a month before the concert).

The history of the regiment is in the hands of the 369th Historical Society. However, that history, manifested in 500 artifacts, is in danger of being forgotten. The founder and president of historical society, Retired Maj. General Nathaniel James, has been reaching out to other institutions and individuals since the State of New York Division of Military and Naval Affairs (DMNA) began renovating the armory, and James was told at the beginning of 2013 that he would need to find proper storage for all the material (Mays 2013). In a letter sent out to supporters of the 369th Historical Society, Maj. Gen. James related how they were packing up and looking for a new home, while the renovation continues (and could take up to three years). The DMNA inventoried their collection and has stored some objects and plans “to install a ‘museum grade’ exhibition” in the armory when work has been completed (Garcia 2014). There are still many other objects, however, that Maj. General James has collected over the decades. As of October 1, 2014, the historical society had relocated to Taino Towers at 240 E. 123rd Street. Although this move is not meant to be permanent, closings and moves weaken the support organizations located at the armory, such as the Veteran’s Association, the 369th Sergeant’s Association, and the Harlem Youth Marines, as well as the historical society by separating them from the location which anchors their identity. [For more information about the historical society, visit their website, www.369historicalsociety.org]. In 2016, the Harlem Hellfighters will celebrate their 100th anniversary. We hope to see them last another century!

Thanks to Bobby Sanabria, Max Martínez, and Alberto Hernández, as well as Maya Alkateb and Max Marinoff (City Lore interns), Mike Amadeo, Richie Blondet, Noemi Figueroa-Soulet, Major General Nathaniel James, and Vinny Tiernan.

References


Ellis Island Passenger Search. www.ellisisland.org


Elena Martínez received an MA in Anthropology and an MA in Folklore at the University of Oregon. Since 1997, she has been a folklorist at City Lore and is currently also the co-artistic director for the Bronx Music Heritage Center. She co-produced the documentary, From Mambo to Hip Hop: A South Bronx Tale, which aired on PBS in September 2006 and won the NCLR’s (National Council of La Raza) 2007 ALMA Award for Best TV Documentary. She has been a contributor to Latinas in the United States: An Historical Encyclopedia by historians Virginia Sánchez Korrol and Vicki L. Ruiz (Indiana University Press 2006); Women’s Folklore & Folklife: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, and Art (ABC-CLIO 2008); and New York State Folklife Reader: Diverse Voices (University Press of Mississippi 2013). She is currently on the Advisory Boards for Casita Maria/Dancing in the Streets’ South Bronx Culture Trail, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies Archive at Hunter College, the Bronx Children’s Museum, and Los Pleneros de la 21. She has been awarded a 2013 BOROMIX Puerto Rican Heritage Award and Comité Noviembre’s Lo Mejor de Nuestra Comunidad 2013. Photo by Francisco Molina Reyes.
Legend Quests to Lily Dale

Of all the legends that I’ve collected in western New York, my favorites come from Lily Dale: a lakeside Spiritualist community founded in 1879. When you walk through the gates of Lily Dale, you enter a quiet community of 19th-century homes and temples where people try to contact the spirits of their deceased loved ones. This community contrasts so sharply with the surrounding town that it seems like another world. In Lily Dale, people don’t just hope to talk to the dead; they expect to do so. Unlike American towns where people talk about one or two haunted houses, Lily Dale seems to have ghosts everywhere. One hundred thirty-five years after its founding, it has an even higher standing in the Spiritualist religion than it did at the time of its beginning.

To understand Spiritualism at Lily Dale, you have to know about the religion’s origins. In 1848, Margaret and Kate Fox inspired Spiritualism’s beginnings through rappings that they attributed to the spirit of a peddler who had been killed in their house. At the time when this happened, Margaret was 14 and Kate was 11. Both young women rapidly became famous as mediums. Forty years later, in 1888, Margaret confessed that she and her sister had made the rapping sounds by snapping their toe joints. A year later, Margaret tried to take her confession back, but this effort did not go well. She and her sister died a few years later.

During my sojourn in New York’s Southern Tier, I have talked with people who have traveled to Lily Dale for a road trip or vacation. Among these people have been college students and a few friends at my university who like to visit psychics. Some of these friends do not want colleagues to know about their visits to Lily Dale. Like teenagers who slip out of their parents’ house to investigate a haunted place, they keep their visits off the radar screen of conventional conversation.

My friend Debbie once told me that when she was in college, she drove to Lily Dale with a group of friends. “We just had to go there, you know?” she told me. “We ran all around. We thought it was cool to be there.” “Did anything happen?” I asked her. “Not really,” she answered, “but I thought something might happen if we stayed a little longer.” Debbie’s trip to Lily Dale with her friends was a typical legend quest; it started with storytelling and ended with discussion of what had and had not happened. Was it problematic that neither Debbie nor her friends had encountered a ghost? No, not at all! All of them enjoyed waiting for something magical to happen, and it seemed okay that nothing startling took place.

When I went to Lily Dale with my husband a few summers ago, I did not view our journey as a legend quest and did not expect anything magical to happen. I was writing a book and needed some material for the Lily Dale section, so this was a research trip. In retrospect, however, I realize that my husband and I did many of the things that legend questers do. During the long drive down the Southern Tier Expressway, I told stories about the Fox sisters’ experiences, mediums’ encounters with spirits, and magician Harry Houdini’s efforts to prove that mediums at Lily Dale were fakers. Once we had arrived and parked our car at Angel House, the bed-and-breakfast where we were staying, we immediately took a walk to visit the Lily Dale Museum and view the remains of the sacred tree called Inspiration Stump. My husband photographed the site where the Fox sisters’ cottage once stood, and we attended a service at which mediums received messages from the dead. Later, I went by myself to the late afternoon service where mediums delivered messages from the dead to summer visitors. No messages came for me, but I wasn’t really expecting to get any.

After dinner and a walk around Lily Dale, we went to bed early. Our room at Angel House, the Goddess Room, had beautiful artwork: sculptures and paintings of female deities. It felt good to drift off to sleep after the long day. Early the next morning, I would get back to work.

Suddenly, late that night or in the early hours of the morning, I sat bolt upright on my side of the bed. From the floor on the bed’s opposite side came ear-splitting, explosive sounds: firecrackers or gunshots? I looked down at the floor but could not see anything there. Then I looked up at the bed and saw a small animal—a deer or a lamb—lying curled up on the bedspread. The animal glowed with white light and looked very peaceful. Uncertain, half asleep, I lay down again and closed my eyes. I did not open them again until sunlight shone through the window.

The next day I asked Frank Takei, Angel House’s co-owner, if anyone else had had an unusual experience in the Goddess Room. Sure, he said, people heard noises there all the time. Some guests called the Goddess Room the “party room,” because of all the late night conversation there. None of them had reported an experience like mine, however.

Was my experience in the Goddess Room a dream or something supernatural? No matter how it came to me, the glimpse of the small, glowing animal left me feeling as if I had been touched by magic. For just a moment, in a 19th-century town founded by Spiritualists, I had heard mysterious sounds and seen an enigmatic image. I had gone on my own legend quest, and it had ended pretty well.

Since the hurricanes of 2011 (Irene) and 2012 (Sandy), New York folklorists have been thinking about the impact of climate change on the resilience of local communities and the survival of folk and traditional cultures that depend on them. In the Caribbean and coastal areas of the southeastern United States, the regular but unpredictable experience of high winds, floods, storm surges, and damaging waves of major climate events have been a cultural constant throughout history. The final scenes of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* offer one iconic, traumatic description from the 1930s. The recent devastation in the Philippines from the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan is a further reminder of this ongoing struggle. Northeasterners’ recent interest in the subject is new only to those whose notion of normal does not include such events. That sense of novelty is bound to change, and the fields of folklore and community cultural development in New York State, as well as beyond, had best learn to find creative and flexible approaches to working in this new environment.

Those folklorists working with refugee communities, especially from areas torn by civil war, have long faced challenges of framing the remnants of cultural survival, but the assumption has often been that the best response to the initial trauma is the reclamation or re-creation of traditional culture in the new context. On the other hand, we are beginning to take a closer look at communities who have faced catastrophe on a regular basis and whose cultural practices encompass that experience. Many immigrant communities of the region have lifetimes of experience with much harsher and unpredictable climates than ours, as it once was, not to mention political and social upheaval. In the New York metropolitan area, these include communities from Haiti, Trinidad, and other Caribbean regions whose experiences with cyclones run deep.

Some communities reflect an equally catastrophic experience of political, social, and military turmoil, including the Lost Boys of Sudan in Syracuse, as documented by Faye McMahon, or the Liberian community of Staten Island, and over the past 30 years, Central American immigrants, including survivors of Guatemala’s “civil war” of repression. Since the 1980s, Guatemalans have been part of the stream of immigration drawn by economic opportunity, but also pushed by oppression and war.

Guatemalans now make up an increasing part of the Latin American population of Westchester County in New York and neighboring Fairfield County in Connecticut, having established a significant presence in the towns of Port Chester, Mount Kisco, and Elmsford in New York, and Stamford, Stratford, and Danbury in Connecticut. Guatemalans are beginning to be recognized as a social and cultural force, both across the region in pan-Latino cultural programs and in social service programs that address healthcare issues, education of next generations, and the multiple challenges facing day laborers.

During the past five years, in my work as a county and regional folklorist in Westchester, I have come to know the Guatemalan community of the region. My initial contacts with community members, who were organizing cultural programs, evoked for me the painful and awkward knowledge of that country’s largest 20th-century disaster: the repression of civil war and genocide dating back to the US-led coup d’état of 1954 and continuing through the orgy of killing of indigenous peoples by the army in the 1980s, aided and abetted by the US, as it waged its counterinsurgency campaigns in neighboring El Salvador and sought to overthrow the government of Nicaragua. Although the worst atrocities of that period ended in Guatemala during the 1990s, accountability remains a distant hope for the people there.

No stranger to the memory of hardship and disaster at home, the community was struck again in early October 2005, when Hurricane Stan barreled in from the Caribbean toward Central America, crossing Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula and its southern state of Chiapas. Immediately to the south, central Guatemala suffered some of the worst rainfall and damaging winds in memory, which caused extensive mudslides and killed hundreds, even thousands.

As news of the catastrophe reached the Guatemalan community of Port Chester, NY, a local Guatemalan couple, Heriberto and Ivonne Diaz, responded with an appeal to the community and to a local Latino church congregation to raise and send support to the affected communities at home. The Diaz’s family brought together activists of the Guatemalan community to form an association to raise support. They chose the name *Hermanos y Amigos de Guatemala* (HAGUA). In the spirit
of other mutual aid societies that have been integral to immigrant communities throughout US history, they raised money and collected food, clothing, and medical supplies to send back to the community of Santiago Panabaj in Guatemala, one most affected by the storm.

Bridging the spirit of cultural survival with community survival, HAGUA started a new project in its second year, which has proved essential to its cohesion and development. They founded a folk dance troupe to serve as a showcase for the organization in Port Chester and at New York metropolitan regional Hispanic and Latino events. Founded as Grupo HAGUA, the troupe has served to engage its own members further in a celebration of Guatemalan culture and reinforce the mission of service on which the larger organization was founded.

The troupe is led by Liliana Lopez, a resident of New Rochelle and native of Chichicastenango in Guatemala. She grew up in a family dedicated to upholding their cultural traditions. In Guatemala, she was a member of Hombres de Maíz (Men of Corn), a cultural troupe that has performed internationally. She has an extensive knowledge of both traditional dress and folk dances of Guatemala. She regularly travels to Guatemala to learn new dances, collect costumes, and stay connected with the traditions and community there.

Members of Grupo HAGUA construct props, paint their own backdrops, and make other decorations for performance events. In addition, they have a set of spectacular costumes and masks imported from Guatemala. These include their signature masks representing deer, trickster monkeys, and other...
animals, as well as human carnival characters such as Spanish conquistadores and officials of colonial times. The troupe has developed a repertoire of dances, including themes of tension and balance between man and the natural world, of planting and harvest, and montages of sickness and shamanic healing rituals. The folk dance tradition that HAGUA represents is a carnival festival genre, with costumes that evoke both a Mayan ancestry and post-conquista cultural mestizaje or mixed ancestry.

Although the dancers of Grupo HAGUA often perform to recordings of traditional marimba music of Guatemala, they have also partnered with live marimba bands, of which there are several based in Stamford, CT. Among these are Marimba Jalapenaca and Marimba Flor de Selva. The signature feature of these bands is the use of a large traditional marimba with its characteristic hanging wooden resonators. Played by three musicians simultaneously, the marimba is a colonial era import to Central America, most likely from Africa through the agency of African slavery, but adopted throughout Guatemala as a national instrument. Modern ensembles typically add a drum set and bass guitar to complement the marimba’s sound with enhanced rhythmic elements.

Grupo HAGUA has participated in Hispanic heritage parades throughout the tri-state area and in both Guatemalan and Latino cultural festivals as well. In addition,
HAGUA has also become a lead organizer of Guatemalan community events in Port Chester, particularly at Saint Peter’s Episcopal Church; the Dominican American pastor at Saint Peter’s, the Reverend Hilario Albert, has been attracting a growing Latino congregation that has brought new life to a previously declining Episcopal church.

**Barrilettes: Votive Kites for the Dead as Symbols of Living Culture**

HAGUA has also developed material and decorative crafts, often coinciding with the need to create costumes and decorations for its public events. Most notable among these are mural painting and votive kite making. Hartford, Connecticut-based visual artist Balam Soto has assisted HAGUA in the creation of large octagonal kites and leading community-based mural painting workshops.

The kites are modeled on the giant kites known as *barilletes*, which are created in honor of the dead and flown on All Saints’ Day or *Día de los Santos*, particularly in the town of Santiago Sacatepéquez, Guatemala. While the original kites often reach sizes of 30 feet in diameter and are flown by a dozen men or more, HAGUA’s versions do not exceed 12 feet in diameter and are not built for flying, but rather for display. They have used these kites as props in regional parades to great effect.

**Staging and Display: The Confluence of Paper Arts and Performance**

In 2010, as folklorist for the Westchester Arts Council, I worked with members of HAGUA to develop two programs: an evening festival concert in May of that year, featuring folk dances, live marimba music, and a visual arts display. The following autumn, I organized an exhibition of Latin American folk arts that use paper as a primary material, and HAGUA lent a set of *barilletes* that became a banner for the exhibition. The May program, entitled *Costumbres y Tradiciones de Guatemala* (Customs and Traditions of Guatemala) was a major event, bringing together a wide sector of the community in a public showcase of the artistry, color, and diversity of Guatemalan folklore. HAGUA invited the New York City-based Guatemalan ensemble Cucumatz to participate in the dances with a set of 16-foot tall puppets that took to the dance floor in the middle of the program.

**Hurricane Survival and Cultural Survival**

Hermanos y Amigos de Guatemala has drawn inspiration from adversity in forming their organization, simultaneously rendering aid to the home communities while creating a cultural program in Port Chester to center the participants’ focus on the legacy of a culture that is no stranger to misfortune.
Folklorists may view many traditional cultures as fragile and threatened, and often they are, but at the same time, we can benefit from the knowledge that folk culture may also be highly resilient in the face of adversity. There are several reasons for this resilience. One is the fact of the survival of traumatic experiences that lie behind many immigrant community’s cultural experiences. It is perhaps simplistic to claim that these communities have developed exceptional strategies to cope with calamity, but experience seems to bear out that conclusion. Another is the quality of artistic and imaginative energy, which is seen not as a luxury or pastime of privilege, but as an essential element of community life. As we contemplate the likelihood of more dramatic climate events, we would do well to give special recognition to community-based strategies for rendering assistance to recovery efforts, especially if they are grounded in expressions of cultural continuity and affirmation.

Endnote

1 This name is taken from the Popol Vuh, the Mayan creation story, to describe the first peoples who were made from corn, an elemental component of Mayan folklore. This name was used as a title for the widely acclaimed 1949 masterpiece of fiction by Guatemalan writer and Nobel laureate, Miguel Ángel Asturias.
Pete Seeger (God bless him) seems to go on forever. He turned me on to folk music in 1955, and he’s turned on millions more both before and since. He may well have influenced you. In March 1996 when recovering in hospital from a pulmonary embolism that I managed to obtain flying to and from America, I wrote a song about his life from the thirties through to the seventies. I managed to get it into five verses, so I must have left a lot out!

I guess I’ve sort of kept the song hidden away since 1996, but if you are anything like me, you are probably on the lookout for songs other people are not singing. And my song about Pete might just be one of those songs!!!

If you would like to sing it, I would be most honored. It’s published here in Great Britain by Fore Lane Music, but that doesn’t mean you can’t make your own amendments, indeed you might like to write another verse to cover the period from the seventies through till now! I own Fore Lane Music, by the way, so feel free. There is one very strange chord tucked away in there; if you need help, contact me.

I’ve enclosed the words at the bottom of this letter. You can hear the song sung in strict timing if you go to my web page (joestead.com), where it can be found. You can also download the sheet music. I’ve split it into two parts, making it easier to print.

[Editor’s note: Just a few weeks before Pete Seeger died, we received this email from folksinger and folklorist Joe Stead on January 10, 2014.]

Just Another Folksinger
I first saw Pete Seeger at St Pancras Town Hall Theatre on October 4, 1959. I was already a folk music enthusiast, but this performance by Pete totally locked me on. Seeger the catalyst, Seeger the idealist, Seeger the friend, has surely been the inspiration for many performers. To me, he is the Godfather of Folk Music. Perhaps the biggest thrill in my career was traveling across the Atlantic in April 1995 to do just one concert with the man. I had always intended to write a song about him, preferably before one of us died, and never quite got around to it. Then, in March 1996, I returned from another tour in the US with a deep vein thrombosis in the right leg. Apparently, I had spent 12 days humping through Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware unaware of just how ill I was. Upon my arrival back in Britain, I was rushed immediately into hospital whereupon it was discovered that the blood clot was on the move around my body. My deep vein thrombosis had turned into a pulmonary embolism. I suddenly realized that if my Pete Seeger song was ever to be written, now was the time. This is the result.

Do you remember those days in the thirties, when you wandered the country alone?
A young and self-exiled traveller, searching perhaps for a home,
In your wildest of dreams, such extravagant schemes,
Must have seemed a light year away,
But banjo in hand, you travelled the land,
And you dreamt of a far better day.

And was it fun in the forties, with Woody and Millard and Lee,
As you sang for the freedom of workers,
In an Almanac fraternity,
As you made up the rhyme, “Wasn’t that a time,”
To be watching those at your back,
But damn it instead, you were looking ahead,
With Toshi by your side you attacked.

As a Weaver of song in the fifties, you spread a great warmth through the land,
But equality and friendship world over was not what your government planned,
For McCarthy was there, and a chill filled the air,
As they pointed the finger of blame,
But through it all, together with Paul, (Robeson)
You sang and you both overcame.

And what did you make of the sixties,
Presidents in the Muddy waste deep,
And the crimes that your country committed, all the lives that were lost, did you weep?
And so proudly you sang, anti-Vietnam, Whilst the wounded came home from the war, They called you a traitor, a red agitator, Whilst you and a few asked “What for?”

So you spent most your life swimming upstream, fighting odds stacked as high as a wall,
Whilst some claimed amendments around you, you stood as you sang, straight and tall,
And whilst some people dithered, you built boats and cleaned rivers,
Spoke out when others were scared,
And your obituary, it must surely be, Thank The Lord, thank The Lord, that he cared.

© Joe Stead, Fore Lane Music, March 1996

Referred to as a legend by some, Joe Stead, who once met Paul Robeson, is certainly a folklorist of some repute on numerous aspects of folklore. As a disciple of Pete Seeger, he had discovered folk music in the late 1950s, visiting the many, now infamous folk clubs that had sprung up around Soho at the time. Since those very early days, Joe has played at all the major folk festivals in Britain and has toured America more times than he can count. He has worked in concert with Pete and recorded him on three LPs to raise funds for British miners while Pete was in London. Joe is the founding member of the group “Kimber’s Men,” who concentrate on songs of the sea. Photo by Darren Flemming.
In this day and age of self-aggrandizing pop stars, it is hard for today's generation to imagine that there ever existed a selfless singer of song who was only concerned with the causes he sang about and not his celebrity.

Well, there was a man of such integrity. I'm talking about our last American folk hero, Pete Seeger. A champion of the disenfranchised since the 1940s, Pete railed against war, pollution, racism, greed, and social injustice for eight decades. He bravely risked a 10-year prison sentence for defying Senator Joe McCarthy's witch hunt in the 1950s and popularized the civil rights anthem, “We Shall Overcome,” for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s historic march in the 1960s. His anti-war song, “Knee Deep in the Big Muddy,” became a force in ending the Vietnam War. He founded the Clearwater organization, which continues to clean up the Hudson River. Right up until the very end, the 94-year-old icon was fighting the good fight. At 94, he performed at the Farm Aid concert, leading Willie Nelson, Dave Matthews, and Neil Young in song against fracking. I spoke and exhibited my art at a gun control rally that Pete had organized and planned to perform at this past January 2014. The only reason he wasn't there was because it coincided with his wake that was taking place about a half a mile down the road.

It's because he sang for things like justice and the environment, and not for record sales, that he is so admired. Besides being in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and winning a Grammy at 90, he was awarded the National Medal of Arts and a Kennedy Center Honor. He was chosen to sing at President Obama's historic first inauguration. Bruce Springsteen devoted an entire album to Pete's songs.

As an artist who's known for creating work that challenges people to think more deeply about many of the same issues that Pete sang about, I have been personally inspired by Pete Seeger. That's why I recently took time off from my sociopolitical paintings to create the portrait of Pete titled, “Beacon Of Hope” that hangs in Pete's (and my)
hometown of Beacon, NY, where the locals cherish their own national treasure.

There is currently a greatly deserved petition to nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize. Somehow, I doubt Kanye West will ever get nominated for a Nobel Prize, unless of course he nominates himself. What made Pete so special is that he never cared about accolades—in fact, he disdained them. He only cared about the making the world a fairer place for generations and trying to preserve it for future ones.

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www.nyfolklore.org/about/member.html
On most spring and fall Thursdays in downtown Glens Falls, you can hear a free concert in Crandall Public Library. Sponsored by the library’s Folklife Center, the music may be bluegrass, ethnic, Celtic, roots, or contradance, but it’s always engaging. It’s often played by local musicians and reflects the heritage of the Southern Adirondacks and Upper Hudson Valley.

Among the frequent concertgoers several years ago were Irv and Fran Shapiro, who had amassed a significant personal folk music collection over a 60-year period. One evening they began discussions with the Folklife Center director, Todd DeGarmo, and arranged to have their collection donated to The Folklife Center of Crandall Public Library.

The gift included over 600 LP recordings, as well as cassettes, songbooks, sheet music, biographical material on some of the musicians represented in the collection, and the first issue of *American Folk Music Magazine*. Among the albums are spoken word recordings, dance, instrumental, and sacred music from the Americas, Caribbean Islands, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Among the musicians are well-known American performers like Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Cisco Houston, Odetta, Jean Ritchie, and Peggy Seeger, as well as ordinary folks whose music was recorded in their communities by musicologists and folklorists, such as John and Alan Lomax, among others.

In the latter group is the album *Folksongs and Music from The Berryfields of Blair*, a compilation of songs recorded in 1954 in Scotland’s berry fields of Blairgowrie. Situated near several small lakes, the fields attracted pickers from all over Scotland, England, and Ireland. Some made their living working the land; others picked fruit as a way to have a pay-as-you-go holiday. Field hands came alone and in families, staying in tents, dugouts, huts, or caravans on the farm, and included Irish and
Scottish Gypsies or Travellers, who brought with them a wealth of traditional music, dance, and folklore. The Standing Stones Farm, on which these recordings were made, was owned by Belle Stewart and her husband Alex, who were themselves Travellers and became well-known folk performers in the United Kingdom and the United States. The music, tales, and a bit of step dancing were recorded during a cèilidh (pronounced kay’lay)—in this case, a gathering around a campfire at the end of the workday. Poet and folklorist Hamish Henderson made the recordings in association with the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh. This was one of a series of albums produced by Prestige International Records and Kenneth S. Goldstein.

Dr. Goldstein (1927–1995), who co-founded the Philadelphia Folk Music Festival, earned the first PhD in folklore awarded by the University of Pennsylvania, where he served for 25 years as Chair of the Department of Folklore and Folklife. During his lifetime, he produced more than 500 albums of folk and blues music for 11 record companies, including Stinson, Riverside, and Folkways, where he served as folk music director. He was also a personal friend of the Shapiros and offered advice and assistance with their record collection. When the Shapiros sold a part of their collection to Ohio State University in 1964, Dr. Goldstein was due to speak on campus and personally delivered the records, rather than risk damaging them in shipment.

In this collection are albums recorded by scholars, such as archivist John Lomax, who made field recordings in Texas prisons, among other places, in order to preserve our musical and cultural heritage—Negro Prison Songs is one such album. There are some 20 albums by Richard Dyer-Bennett, who revived the art of traditional English balladry and minstrelsy, a storytelling format that combines music and poetry, including two highly acclaimed self-titled albums, Richard Dyer-Bennett #1 and Richard Dyer-Bennett #2. American poet and balladeer Carl Sandburg collected and sang songs of the American West. Among them is Cowboy Songs and Negro Spirituals, which he recorded for the Decca Records’ American Folk Music Series. Mr. Sandburg’s book, The American Songbook, is also part of this collection.

There are albums that reflect northeastern, upstate New York, including Pete Seeger’s Champlain Valley Songs and Songs of a New York Lumberjack by Ellen Stekert. There are albums that trace US history and politics: John and Lucy Allison’s Ballads of the American Revolution and the War of 1812, Woody Guthrie’s Talking Dust Bowl, and Pete Seeger’s Gazette—an album of topical songs, including “Banks of Marble,” which was written about the Depression but might, with a few lyrical changes, describe the Great Recession during the late 2000s. There are also countless albums that trace the roots of our culture back to the British Isles, the Caribbean, and Africa.

There are also some surprises in this collection—reminders that it is, after all, a personal collection. There’s popular American dance music from the 1950s and ’60s, and A Treasury of Ribaldry, selected readings from the work of Oscar Wilde and Ben Franklin, recorded by the comedic English actor Martyn Green.

Irring Shapiro was a professor of public health at the former State of New York Downstate Medical Center and Columbia University. Born in 1918 in the Bronx, he and his wife Frances were longtime residents of New York City and were very involved in the local folk dance scene of the 1950s and 60s. In addition to a long-standing interest in folk music, Mr. Shapiro was also a photographer whose work, A Soldier’s Eye: Europe 1944, was exhibited locally at the Lower Adirondack Regional Arts Center, SUNY Adirondack, and Union College. For 35 years, the Shapiros split their time between Florida and their farm in Riparius, north of Glens Falls. They moved to Queensbury (just outside Glens Falls) in 2001, where Mr. Shapiro died in 2009.

The Shapiro Folk Music Library has been added to Crandall Public Library’s online catalog at www.crandalllibrary.org. Searching “Shapiro folk music library” will provide information on the entire collection of albums. One can also search more specifically for an album, musician, or song title. The call number for each album maintains the Shapiros’ own cataloging system (seen added by the Shapiros to the top left of each album cover). The entire collection of albums is also being digitized to fulfill their wishes to keep the albums pristine, while making the music available to the public. Volunteers are using a turntable connected to an Apple computer and Audacity free software to record the music in real time. Each album track is then processed to reduce background noise and clicks to improve the listening experience. Song tracks are labeled with the album and song titles, the artists who perform on each track, and the year in which the album was produced. The tracks are prepared for export and imported into iTunes, from which patrons of the library will be able to listen to the music in the Folklife Center’s research room.
The POEMobile Dreams of Peace

BY STEVE ZEITLIN

The Brooklyn-Queens Expressway (BQE) is bumper to bumper. Up in the cab of the POEMobile, I can see a clear and beautiful view of nighttime Manhattan on my left, but curving ahead for miles along this crazy, twisted excuse for a highway, traffic is at a standstill. I’m returning home from the POEMobile’s celebration for the Muslim holiday of Eid at Diversity Plaza in Jackson Heights, Queens.

The POEMobile is a magnificent, brightly painted, poem-bedecked art truck with painted iron wings arching above its roof and poems in a two dozen languages emblazoned on its side—beneath which hides a dilapidated 1988 Chevy Step Van, which could conk out at any moment.

The name POEMobile is inscribed in cut metal above the cab above the Pablo Neruda line:

Llegó la poesía a buscarme / Poetry came in search of me.

The POEMobile, sponsored by Bowery Arts + Science and City Lore, projects poems onto walls and buildings in tandem with live readings and musical performances in neighborhoods in New York. As poets perform in their native languages from the street or plaza, the words float above their heads, often several stories high. The projections open with an animated, feathered wing brushing words onto the building, inspired by a Martin Espada line: “God must be an owl, electricity coursing through the hollow bones, a white wing brushing the building.”

With the POEMobile stuck in a classic late night New York City traffic jam standstill, my mind wanders back to our recent programs—a Russian/Ukrainian Yevgeny Yevtushenko tribute on the Bowery; a Persian Norooz/New Year celebration in DUMBO, and both a Korean and a Chinese New Year celebration in and around Flushing Town Hall in Queens. Specially designed software enables poems in their original language to morph into English and vice versa. The community experiences the impact of the poetry in their spoken tongue, while the English-speaking visitors and neighbors grasp the deep poetic experiences of the foreign language poets they live among.

As traffic inches forward, one car length at a time, my mind muses on this guerilla poetry, set up in diverse urban neighborhoods, creating momentary beauty in words and music and light, and traveling under the radar of both news outlets and, for the most part, the authorities.

Under the radar. This contraption travels under the radar. That’s what sparked the traffic-induced dream. . . . World War III breaks out, and the allies are under attack from all fronts. The crew of the POEMobile is out of work, as all funding for the arts has been summarily axed. The new AXIS powers of Iran, Iraq, Korea, China, and Russia move to take over the world. It’s a scene right out of a cheesy Hollywood movie. The Allied powers are on the verge of collapse. Our Nighthawks, Raptors, and drones can’t penetrate their missile defense systems. Our counterattacks are continually repelled.

“Hey,” I say to my partner in crime, the poet Bob Holman, director of Bowery Arts + Science. “Remember? This thing flies under the radar.”

Without warning, jet engines appear on the POEMobile’s iron wings, and this crazy contraption takes flight. Bob adjusts his helmet, electricity coursing through his veins.

First stop, the peace rally in Washington Square. We need CJ, our projection maven. We find him fiddling with a projector lens inside a DUMBO warehouse where an Occupy War peace rally is forming.

“CJ—get in here—we’re flying out—bring the projector—we need 100,000 lumens NOW!”

Next, we need Fletcher. Where is she? Getting ready
to read her poems at the KGB bar in the East Village. We text her, only to hear back, "But I'm reading my Superwomen poem cycle next."

"Bring 'em with you."

"What do you need me for?"

"Navigation."

"Ah, a little program planning."

"We need peace poems from the Korean, Russian, Persian, and Chinese POEMobile presentations."

"Got it. Chief. I guess the POEMobile programs sought to create understanding with some of the same groups we're fighting now. Ironic, huh?"

Meanwhile let him go running with or without his plural, through the nice old parks in Brooklyn, through the woodlands near the streets that lie beyond the

The POEMobile careens in a flurry of colors and painted metal, feathered wings down into the capital cities of the Axis powers. "Head for the downtown between the tall buildings."

The brightly colored poetry bird careens and zigzags between the skyscrapers of the apocalypse, a white wing brushing the buildings. Hovering outside a downtown Baghdad skyscraper window, CJ lowers the projector into place. Perched on the Steadicam, the projector casts a beam of poetry on to the wall. The Baghdad audience gathers and grows, stands transfixed by poetry and peace larger than life. A tank rolls in—the POEMobile darts around one corner after another, towards the people, going wherever peaceiks gather. Cast on a building in downtown Baghdad, the words of Forugh Farrokhzad (1935–1967), translated by Farzaneh Milani:

Kuş ailesi, sen uçsun hâlde / Remember flight, the bird is mortal

Then in Moscow, on the walls of the Hermitage, through a brevity of aircraft fire, CJ steadies his baby. Words of a Yevtushenko poem three stories high on a wall:

I am each old man here shot dead.
I am every child here shot dead.

Unnoticed by the foreign news departments, shoulder-to-air missiles explode far above us, the crazy copter dodging the skyscrapers of power.

In Beijing, suddenly, we crisscross a corner and project onto the walls of the Forbidden City an ancient Chinese peace poem:

If there is light in the soul,
There will be beauty in the person.
If there is beauty in the person,
There will be harmony in the house.
If there is harmony in the house,
There will be order in the nation.
If there is order in the nation,
There will be peace in the world.

The people cheer.

Suddenly, on both sides of the busy street, the tanks hole in on our position—the big guns roar, the air awash in missiles. They strike time in its inexorable flight—for the POEMobile remains in midair, motionless, the projector still casting poems of peace onto the walls and buildings of the enemies. Whether the projections brought peace to the world or the POEMobile was blown out of the sky remains a blur. . . .

The BQE, on the other hand, starts to move. The tractor-trailer wreckage has been removed. The POEMobile is moving again, beautiful, sublime, projecting a narrow beam of light under the radar, back here at home where we need it.

The POEMobile projects poems in English and Yiddish on to the Eldridge Street facade. Photo © Abby Ronner 2012.
Sometime shortly before 1910, a conversation between men from two very different worlds took place in northern New Jersey. John Dyneley Prince was Professor of Semitic Languages at Columbia University. A member of New York’s intellectual elite, with a BA from Columbia and a PhD from Johns Hopkins, he had participated in an archaeological expedition to Mesopotamia before writing his doctoral thesis on Assyriology. His talent for linguistics allowed him to make contributions in the study of many non-Semitic languages, and later led him to become an expert in Slavic languages. From 1891 onward, Prince lived at Ringwood Manor in Passaic County, New Jersey, and his election to the New Jersey Assembly in 1905 marked the beginning of a political career, which lasted several decades (Scannell 1919; Manning 1945; Pares 1946). While living in northern New Jersey, he became interested in the Jersey Dutch dialect and began interviewing the few people he could find that still spoke it. He described one of his informants as “William De Freece, a negro (mixed with Minsi Indian), ætæt. [aged] 75, a laborer on the Hewitt estate at Ringwood, Passaic County, NJ, an excellent authority on the negro variant of the dialect” (Prince 1910, 460).

One example of Jersey Dutch offered by De Freece was the following series of verses thought to be able to cure rheumatism, which Prince called a “negro charm”:

\[
\text{Altàit än zômer} \\
\text{Stât de zûve bôme} \\
\text{āskén åike än āl de lâng vôrbâi} \\
\text{Kân nît rolle; wât er opstât}
\]

Always in summer
stand the seven trees;
ash and oak and all along past
I cannot guess what they are standing on (Prince 1910, 467)

These verses have only been analyzed as folklore three times. Prince himself offered the first analysis of what he considered a “rather incomprehensible charm.” De Freece explained to him, “that the seven trees symbolize the seven stars…, and that they seem to be standing on nothing. They, therefore, cannot go along. Then follows the query, as to what they are standing on” (Prince 1910, 467). Having recently been immersed in Mesopotamian studies, Prince guessed that the seven stars represented the seven planets (Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn) of Babylonian astrology. Unable to make further sense of the verses, he wrote that he was “inclined to doubt the accuracy of De Freece’s text” (Prince 1910, 467) and proposed the following modification:

\[
\text{Altàit än zômer} \\
\text{Stât de zûve bôme} \\
\text{āskén åike än āl de lâng vôrbâi} \\
\text{Kân nît râde wât er opstât}
\]

Always in summer
stand the seven trees;
ash and oak and all along past
I cannot guess what they are standing on (Prince 1910, 467)

Thus Prince, the university-educated linguist, assumed the necessity and right to correct the Jersey Dutch of De Freece, the uneducated, nonwhite laborer, adding that his change “makes sense of the text at least” (Prince 1910, 467). Actually, Prince’s “correction” and his misidentification of the seven stars only further obscured the probable meaning of these verses.

Using Prince’s data, linguist John Holm analyzed De Freece’s language as a possible example of a Dutch Creole, citing several common characteristics of Creole languages. Nevertheless, Holm observed that the small amount of evidence recorded by Prince was insufficient to definitively identify De Freece’s speech as a Dutch Creole. Holm reprinted De Freece’s verses on the seven trees with two new insights. First, he suggested that the seven stars referred to by De Freece should be compared with the Gullah and Bahamian Creole English phrase “seven
star,” meaning the Pleiades. Second, he considered the verses to be a riddle, comparable with others recorded from the Caribbean and West Africa (Holm 1989).

Folklorist David Steven Cohen offered another interpretation of De Freece’s charm in 1995. Like Holm, he considered it to be a riddle, and wrote, “The answer to the riddle is that the trees are stars, which explains why they are standing on nothing” (Cohen 1995, 38). He compared De Freece’s seven stars to the one large and six small stars incised on a calabash from a Rio de Janeiro museum, which art historian Robert Farris Thompson identified as a Kongo cosmogram, and Cohen postulated that De Freece’s charm “may well have been a survival of the cosmological belief system of the Bakongo people that ascribes a magical significance to the motif of seven stars” (Cohen 1995, 38).

Holm and Cohen both looked for an African or African diaspora origin for the verses, a position that is open to question. Although riddles are common in African diaspora folklore, De Freece’s verses do not resemble their standard form: a short and purposefully perplexing description of something followed by an even shorter explanation (see Courlander (1996) for examples). Thompson also described the stars on the Brazilian calabash as meteorites and equated them with the Kongo ancestor spirit Pai Velho, details which are nowhere reflected in De Freece’s text or comments (Thompson 1984). Although Prince preferred to identify the verses as a “negro charm,” he noted De Freece’s mixed African American–Native American ancestry. William De Freece was a member of a small ethnic group from both sides of the New York–New Jersey border, known pejoratively from the 1870s to the 1970s as the Jackson Whites, and renamed as the Ramapo Mountain People by Cohen in 1972–74. They adopted the name Ramapough Mountain Indians in 1978, and were recognized as the Ramapough Indians by the New Jersey and New York state legislatures in 1980 (“Summary” n.d.).

**Implications for Ramapough Ethnicity**

These verses hold implications for ideas of Ramapough ethnicity, which have been contested for over 200 years. Their multiracial origins were poorly documented, so that different interpretations have been given to the relative importance of African American, Euro-American, and Native American ancestry. Members of the group identified themselves as Indian as early as 1760 (Cohen 1972; Cohen 1974). Outsiders saw Ramapough origins as a mystery to be solved and offered theories between the 1870s and 1920s that the people were descendants of runaway slaves, Hessian deserters, black and white prostitutes of the British army, Tuscarora Indian migrants, Lenape (Delaware) Indian groups, or various combinations of these. Cohen was able to dismiss the first four of these theories as folk legends through his thorough historical research. He found compelling evidence in colonial records that the first people bearing the typical Ramapough surnames De Freece, Mann, and Van Dunkt were free pioneers of color, descended from Dutch men and African women. These families moved from Manhattan to the Hackensack Valley and finally, along with members of the colored De Groat family, to the Ramapo Mountains (Cohen 1972; Cohen 1974). Cohen congratulated himself and was congratulated by other scholars for having solved the “mystery” of Ramapough origins (Cohen 1972; Collins 1972; Henige 1984).

When it came to the question of possible Lenape origins, Cohen considered existing evidence and even presented new evidence, before essentially dismissing it in favor of his Dutch-African theory. Although Cohen uncovered the evidence that John De Fries listed himself as Indian on a militia roster in 1760, he went on to state: “This does not necessarily mean he was an Indian. He might have been trying to avoid the unfavorable attitude most whites had toward free blacks and mulattoes” (Cohen 1974, 42), and more bluntly, “he may have wanted to pass as Indian rather than be considered black” (Cohen 1972, 263). While admitting the possibility of some intermarriage with Lenapes, he wrote that “it probably could not have involved more than one or two individuals or there would have been more documentary evidence” (Cohen 1974, 42). He compared the herb cures and folk remedies known to the Ramapough with those used by the Lenape, and declared that they “may be the only survivals of authentic Indian culture in the culture of the Ramapo Mountain People. But they cannot safely be taken as evidence of Indian ancestry because both European and African settlers in colonial America borrowed many herb cures from the Indians” (Cohen 1974, 206). He admitted that some cures may have been borrowed from Native Americans, but stated that associated folk beliefs were “closer to the European tradition of witchcraft than to the American Indian tradition of shamanism” (Cohen 1974, 176). Cohen summarized that, “Notwithstanding some folk remedies and herb cures which may have been borrowed from the American Indians,” the Ramapo Mountain People’s culture was basically Christian and European, not Native American (Cohen 1974, 196). Although a Ramapough informant told Cohen that “most of the people up there in the beginning were Indians,” and that they had intermarried with two Dutch men (who brought the Dutch language to the people), the scholar decided that the Ramapough claims of Indian ancestry served only to deny African ancestry (Cohen 1972, 265).

Cohen may well have had the best of intentions. Working during the era of the War on Poverty and the Black Pride movement, he thought he had found truths that would set the Ramapo Mountain People free: free from prejudice and free to take pride in their own “lost history refound” (Cohen 1972, 263). Some Ramapoughs were pleased with his interpretation of their history, but by claiming that there was little to no evidence of Native American ancestry or culture, he contradicted what many other Ramapoughs had believed and continued to want to believe (Cohen 1972; Cohen 1974).

In response, the people identified themselves as Ramapough Mountain Indians, sought state-level recognition, and took the
first step in applying for federal recognition in 1978–80. In 1990 and 1992, they submitted further documents in their application for federal recognition as Indians, which if achieved, would have entitled them to federal benefits, including the right to operate casinos under the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA) of 1988. A long and bitter legal process ensued, in which the Ramapough charged the Bureau of Indian Affairs’ Branch of Acknowledgment and Research (BAR) with racism, and BAR officials made veiled allegations of attempted bribery by a supposed Ramapough representative who asked, “what it would take to ‘walk the papers through the process’” (“Summary” n.d.). At the same time, Atlantic City casino owner Donald Trump made clear his opposition to federal recognition of his possible competitor, even filing a federal lawsuit in an attempt to have the IGRA declared unconstitutional. In the end, the Bureau of Indian Affairs did not deny that the Ramapough were Indian but refused them federal recognition as a tribe, because they had failed to demonstrate an unbroken history of tribal organization (Maillard 2003; McCulloch 1994; “Summary” n.d.).

After the case for recognition had run its course, Cohen published his opinions of Ramapough history once again in Folk Legacies Revisited. He restated his earlier conclusions and criticized those who did not accept his interpretation as “anthropologists, folklorists, and historians who take the position that there are no objective historical facts” (Cohen 1995, 6); he considered only documentary evidence to be historical fact. He called anthropologist James Clifford’s critique of his own work a “deconstructionist approach, which views historical facts as irrelevant” (Cohen 1995, 15). To Cohen, those historical facts were his own genealogical research, which he said proved that the Ramapough “descend primarily from free blacks and who have only a legendary claim to early Indian ancestry” (Cohen 1995, 15).

No one can study the Ramapough people without taking Cohen’s work into consideration. As a professional scholar who devoted years to the intensive investigation of Ramapough history and culture, his conclusions carry much weight. He did more than anyone else to permanently dispel the pejorative names and myths of origin attached to this group of people. Nevertheless, his theory of Dutch-African colored pioneer origins can be questioned insofar as it systematically minimized Native American cultural contributions and negated the possibility of Native American ancestry. A reconsideration of William De Freece’s so-called “negro charm” shows that it could more properly be labeled a “Lenape charm” and examined as evidence of both Lenape culture and ancestry among the Ramapough.

The Seven Stars and the Seven Trees

De Freece’s identification of the seven trees with the seven stars is the key to the Lenape connection. As Holm surmised, the seven stars are the Pleiades. This cluster of jewel-like, blue stars set in the shoulder of the constellation Taurus the Bull has inspired folklore on every inhabited continent. Several peoples around the world have used the seasonal motions of the Pleiades to mark the start of a new year (Ceci 1978; Lévi-Strauss 1983; Wonderley 2009; Winkler 1970). In North America alone, folklorist Stith Thompson identified 17 different indigenous groups with an “origin of the Pleiades” story (Thompson [1929], 1968). Stories that explicitly link trees to the seven stars, as De Freece did in explaining his charm to Prince, are relatively rare, but folklorist John Bierhorst noticed the pattern of an “origin of the Pleiades with tree motif” among the Lenape, Iroquois, Wyandot, Cherokee, and Natchez people of North America (Bierhorst 1995). The Quiché Maya of Guatemala and the Noongaburra people of Australia also include trees in their Pleiades stories (Bassie-Sweet 2008; Park 1966).

In analyzing these stories, we see that the greater the distance from the Ramapough homeland, the less they resemble De Freece’s account in how they relate the trees to the stars. The Noongaburra story involves two sisters who were taken up to heaven by two fast-growing pine trees to join their five sisters (Park 1966). The Quiché Maya tale tells how the Four Hundred Boys convinced the crocodile Zipacna to dig a hole for the central post of their house, and then attempted to kill Zipacna by dropping a large log (representing the world tree) on top of him. Zipacna survived and killed the boys by knocking their house down upon them, after which the boys became the Pleiades (Bassie-Sweet 2008). The Cherokee story relates how seven disobedient boys danced up to heaven to spite their scolding mothers, and how one boy’s mother pulled him back so hard that he was swallowed by the Earth. She cried over the spot until a pine tree grew from the ground, so that “the pine is of the same nature as the stars and holds in itself the same bright light” (Mooney 1995, 258–59). The Iroquois (specifically Seneca) story is similar to the Cherokee story, with the seven boys being brothers, and the eldest falling to Earth after looking down, yet the boy is still swallowed by the Earth and becomes the first pine tree after his mother weeps over the spot (Parker 1989). In the Wyandot story, seven boys played and danced under a tree. Becoming hungry, they asked an old woman for food. On being refused, they continued dancing until they rose up above the tree to become the Pleiades (Lévi-Strauss 1983). The Natchez story features seven people who left their community, fasted for a year, and turned themselves into pine trees after deciding not to return. When white men arrived with axes, they turned themselves into rocks, and when white men began to use stone, they turned themselves into stars (Swanton 1929). None of these people can be considered as likely contributors to Ramapough culture for obvious geographic reasons, and only the Natchez story mentions seven trees that actually became seven stars. In a study of Iroquois myths, Anthony Wonderley notes that the pine tree is “peripheral to the Iroquois plot, possibly because it is foreign, a detail borrowed from the neighboring Lenape/Delaware” (Wonderley 2009, 4).

The Lenape, in fact, were in the right place to contribute to the Ramapough population, and they also told stories that equated seven trees with the seven stars. In a text recorded
by M. R. Harrington from the Unami Delaware people in Oklahoma sometime between 1907 and 1910, seven boys, who “could go above in the air and down in the ground,” left their parents (Bierhorst 1995, 98). They went to a hill, turned to red stones, and said, “If you want to see us, you can come here. Only clean people can come and see us” (Bierhorst 1995, 98). After many visits from people, the rocks were soiled by “one fellow that didn’t believe” (Bierhorst 1995, 98), and the boys removed themselves to another place and transformed themselves into seven pine trees, again saying that the people could visit them there. Being bothered by the many people who came to lie under their shade, the boys ascended into the sky to become the seven stars. They told the people: “You people can always see us up above. We will watch the frosts. In the spring when you cannot see us in the west, there won’t be any more frosts. And in the fall you can see us in the east. So you know that it is getting cold and frosts appear. We will always be in the skies and never change to another” (Bierhorst 1995, 99).

In a similar version, recorded by anthropologist Frank Speck from the Oklahoma Delaware informant Wi-tapano’xwe, seven “living men of great spiritual power” or “prophets” suddenly disappeared (Speck 1931, 171). Their whereabouts remained unknown until “pure youths” walking on a ridge discerned that the prophets had transformed themselves into seven stones (Speck 1931, 171). After this discovery, so many people went to seek the prophets’ help that they once again disappeared. Eventually, another person discovered that they had become “seven beautiful appearing pine trees,” some of which Wi-tapano’xwe said “appeared as cedars in outward appearance” in order to relate the story to a larger discourse on the sacredness and healing power of the cedar (Speck 1931, 173). Once again, the seven prophets disappeared and became “a group up above in the middle of the sky as seven stars and they are called, when they are seen, as though they were very great persons, for which reason from then on until now they never stay in one place during the year” (Speck 1931, 173). The Pleiades thus had their origin in seven boys or prophets who transformed themselves into rocks, pine (or cedar) trees, and finally stars. Both versions of the story show concern with the movement of the Pleiades in the heavens. In the first version, they tell the people when the frosts will end in the spring and begin again in the fall through their seasonal movement, thus demarcating the growing season for crops. In the second version, their constant motion is related to their tendency to escape the demands of the people who call on them for help.

How can De Freece’s phrase “ash and oak” be explained if the Native American stories of the Seven Stars clearly identify the trees as pines or cedars? The Jersey Dutch original recorded by Prince, āike, bears more than a passing resemblance to the Lenape word asisko’taya’sak. Meaning “bunched up,” asisko’taya’sak is one of the Lenape names for the Pleiades (Ceci 1978; spelled asi’k’taya’s·ak in Speck (1931) and Anschiktauwevak in Zeisberger (1910)). The fact that De Freece was Prince’s only source for the words āike and āike means that no other informant confirmed their meaning (Prince 1910). The verses most likely originated with a person who was bilingual in Jersey Dutch and Lenape. That person may have engaged in wordplay by replacing asisko’taya’sak with āike, knowing that others would understand both meanings (bilingual punning). Alternately, asisko’taya’sak could have been replaced with āike as knowledge of Lenape died out, and people who only spoke Jersey Dutch attempted to make sense of the text through homophonous translation.

De Freece’s verses are difficult for modern Dutch speakers to translate, but those I have consulted have questioned the accuracy of Prince’s translation, especially the last two lines (Tweraser 2014; Hartoch 2014). A possible original meaning of the verses is: “Always in summer / the seven trees stand; / the Pleiades are long gone; / they cannot roll by what goes up there.” As short and cryptic as De Freece’s charm is, it reveals the same preoccupation with the seasonal movements of the Pleiades in the sky found in North-eastern Native American myths. Summer, specifically mentioned in the charm, is the season when the Pleiades are invisible in the Northeast, since they disappear below the horizon in mid-May and reappear in mid-October (Ceci 1978; Winkler 1970). Their disappearance from the night sky, which marked the beginning of the corn-planting season, could also inspire the belief that they had stopped moving altogether, hence the trees “stand” (as in “stand still”) and “cannot roll by” or move.

There only remains the question of why a charm related to the Pleiades was believed by the Ramapough to cure rheumatism. According to Speck, the Oklahoma Delaware Tribe believed that rheumatism could be caused by a person who had shaman power and who used it to harm rather than help people (Speck 1931). In Native American belief, such a witch or evil shaman could be fought by a good shaman. It would make sense, then, to appeal to the seven good shamans who had become the Pleiades, and who were additionally associated with the healing powers of the cedar, as one possible cure for rheumatism.

The ethnicity of the people who now call themselves the Ramapough Mountain Indians has long been a controversial subject. They have a long tradition of emphasizing the Native American element in their ancestry, and outsiders (both hostile and well-meaning) have a long history of denying such ancestry in favor of European, and especially African, origins. The charm that William De Freece told to John Dyneley Prince around 1900 has attracted little attention as folklore, yet it points to Lenape ancestors for the Ramapough. Like Lenape myth, the charm equates seven trees with the seven stars or Pleiades and shows a marked concern with their seasonal movements. A Lenape name for the Pleiades may have even been preserved in the charm, disguised as a Jersey Dutch phrase for trees. The most thorough scholar of the Ramapough, David Steven Cohen, once wrote that, “They identify with the American Indians, but they possess no authentic Indian cultural traits” (Cohen 1972, 260). In light of the evidence
in De Freece’s charm, such a statement can no longer be sustained.

Note

1 Felix Twerser is Professor of German and Chair of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of West Georgia. Else Hartoch is the Collection and Research Coordinator at the Gallo-Romeins Museum, Tongeren, Belgium, and a native Dutch speaker.

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From the Editor (continued)

flavorings. For them, it has to be the real deal, or why bother?

My thought this spring is to send them some of Tim Dwyer’s maple syrup. Tim, a neighbor around the corner, boils maybe 200 gallons of syrup each year. It’s also a good excuse to bring a dish to his annual Shushan Sity Sap Shack potluck, featuring craft beer made from his syrup, and providing company during the long hours of boiling. I’ll also pick up some maple sugar. My daughter loves this treat and thinks it the perfect gift to bring to her German host family during a musical exchange this coming summer.

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News and Notes

The New York Folklore Society gives best wishes and a fond farewell to folklorist, Lisa Overholser. Lisa has served in the capacity of folklorist and program director for the New York Folklore Society since 2008, managing the Mentoring and Professional Development Program and originating many programs for the Society, such as the Hungarian Dance House program and several programs drawing attention to the Music of the Erie Canal within the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor. As she departs in late 2014 for a job in St. Louis, Missouri, we wish her all the best for her success.

The 2014 Folk Arts Roundtable (our 29th!) was held December 2-4, in Troy, NY, and featured a workshop on video documentation, as well as opportunities for all in the field to discuss current projects and future plans. Thanks to the Sanctuary for Independent Media and the Arts Center of the Capital Region, and all who attended. Next Roundtable is May 2015. Stay tuned for more information.

Maple Sugar Moon

Long ago maple syrup dripped, thick from the trees. All year round, you just had to break a twig and lie down beneath the tree with open mouth.

But the people got lazy and when Our Creator, Git-chee Man-ni-tou, sent his helper, Man-a-bo-zho, to visit, he found their village deserted and all the people asleep under the maple trees.

So he poured much water into all the maples so that now the people would have to wake up, make fires and boil down the sap to make syrup. They would have to work hard, for that maple sap would flow just this one time of the year, the time we now call Maple Sugar Moon.


MAPLE JOHNNYCAKE

Johnnycake was a staple of New York’s early Yankee settlers. The word may derive from journey-cake, a brick of cornmeal and water that travelers could bake over an open fire. This version, from Iona Brewer of Canton, has a nice maple sweetness that makes it delicious for breakfast.

2 eggs
½ cup milk
½ cup maple syrup
½ cup butter, melted
1 cup flour
1 cup cornmeal
3 teaspoons baking powder
¼ teaspoon salt

Beat the eggs; add the milk, maple syrup, and melted butter. Combine the flour, cornmeal, baking powder, and salt. Add the flour mixture to the liquid ingredients, beating until everything is well blended. Pour the batter into a greased 8-inch pan. Bake at 400 degrees for 25 to 30 minutes.

[From “Treasure from the Sugar Shack,” the Foodways column by Lynn Case Ekfeld, in Voices, Fall-Winter 2003.]
“Dead Man’s Liver”—
A Jump Tale

[Author’s Note: When I perform this tale, I usually begin with the following introduction.]

I was doing a show for a bunch of middle school kids, I think 7th graders in Manchester, VT, around 1985, and I asked them a question I sometimes ask, “Has anybody here ever had somebody—not a professional like me, or a teacher or librarian, just somebody in your regular life—had somebody like that tell you a story, out of their head, without a book?”

I got the usual kinds of answers: my father told me about when he was in the army, my grandmother told me about my mother when she was little, a babysitter told me “Rumpelstiltskin.” Then one kid raised his hand and said, “My uncle told me one; we were sitting out by the fire at deer camp, and it was called ‘Johnny Got My Liver.’”

Well, that did sound like one I might like.

So I said, “What was it about?”

He said, “It’s the kind of story you can’t say what it’s about, you just have to tell it.”

I thought that was a pretty sophisticated answer for a kid, and I got even more interested. I said, “Listen, this show’s going to be over in awhile, then I have 15 minutes before the next group comes in, so do you think you could stay behind and tell me the story?”

He said, “I don’t know. I’d have to ask my teacher.”

I said, “Where’s your teacher?”

He said, “I don’t know.”

I said, “What about after school?”

He said, “I have to catch a bus.”

I said, “Is there a late bus?”

He said, “Well, yeah, … but …”

I didn’t blame him. Why would he want to stick around and wait for the late bus? I said, “Do you think he made it up, or do you think he heard it somewhere?”
The kid was positive, “Oh, I think he heard it somewhere!”

Now I was feeling desperate. That almost never happens—never happened to me before this one—where you run into somebody who heard a tale from somebody who heard it from somebody else. I needed to hear that story, and there didn’t seem to be any way of getting it. The whole show came to a grinding halt. I was looking at him, he was looking at me, everybody was looking at us, we were frozen, it was like a bad dream—I actually have nightmares like that—and then the kid sitting next to him gave him a little jab with his elbow and said, “Get up there and tell it.”

This was not necessarily a good idea. Wonderful in a workshop, to be sure, but very risky in a performance. I was feeling goofy enough to say, “Yeah! Yeah, come on up here and tell it.”

[As I begin the story, I pretend to be the boy, sitting down, beginning very shyly, gathering confidence as the story gathers steam. I didn’t always do it that way, but have found it to be the most effective way. The storytellers’ name for this kind of story is “jump tale.” The trick of it is to build up suspense and then jump and shout very suddenly. Ideally, your audience will jump too, and then talk and laugh loudly for about 15 seconds.]

Dead Man’s Liver

So, there was this kid, see. And his mom sent him to the store to buy some liver. And he didn’t even like no liver. So she gave him 75 cents, but on the way to the store, he passed by another store. And there were video game sounds coming out. And it was just like those video game sounds reached out through that door, and grabbed the kid by the change in his pocket, pulled him through the door and snaked down into his pocket, and grabbed the quarter and swallowed it down—GLUCK!—(you know the sound they make)—GLUCK!

And he played his first game, and he did lousy! Lost all three guys, bam bam bam, like that. Woulda done better if he’d kept his hands offa the buttons.

“I can’t leave now,” he says, “not after a game like that.”

And he played his second quarter, and he done great. Extra boards, extra guys, stuff coming down at him he’d never even heard about. Put his name on after.

“Geez,” he said, “I can’t leave now, not after a game like that.” (That’s how they get you.)

So he played his last quarter, and it didn’t matter how good he done, he didn’t have no money.

So he went to the grocer for the liver, but the grocer said, “NO!” He said, “You don’t give me no money, I don’t give you no liver.”

“But I’ll get in trouble!”

“Nothin’ new for you,” says the grocer. Grocer knew this kid. Actually, most people in town knew this kid.

[I find that bit funny. You may get a smile or even a small laugh, if you make room for it.]

So, he left, and on the way out the door, he grabbed a plastic bag off the roll, stuffed it in his pocket. And on the way home, he happened to pass by… an open coffin. With nobody around.

[This is a kind of joke, again. See if you can get an audience reaction here.]

He said to himself, what I need is... some liver!

[Look in coffin. Wait for audience reaction. Back before I started pretending to be the kid while telling the story, some folks got weirded out by my enthusiasm here. Why was a theoretical grown-up acting like that? But you have to be enthusiastic, or it doesn’t work at all. And for a junior high kid to relish the icky parts of the story—well, there’s nothing weird about that—in fact, it’s funny.]

What I got here, is... some liver!

[Wait for audience reaction.]
And he took out his knife... and he...

[With great enjoyment. As I narrate, I pretend to take out a penknife, hold it pointing down in my fist, and make a big circle with it. Don’t try to be realistic; it’ll work against the laugh.]

CUT OUT THE GUY’S LIVER!

[No good trying to soft peddle this one. You want your audience to go “EUUUUUUUUUUUUU!” If they’re too uncomfortable, I’ll prompt them like an old-time preacher, “Can I get an ‘Euuuu?’”]

And he put it in his plastic bag, and tied it up with a twisty, and took it home to his mother, AND SHE TOOK IT!
(Audience: “EUUUUUUUUUUUUU!”)

[If you enjoy the audience’s reaction and let them know it’s okay, more and more people will join in on the Euuuuuuuu! chorus.]

And she floured it, and she fried it, and THEY ALL ATE IT!
(Audience: “EUUUUUUUUUUUUU!”)

And they all agreed: IT WAS THE BEST LIVER THEY EVER HAD IN THEIR LIVES!
(Audience: “EUUUUUUUUUUUUU!”)

[Pause now to let the audience know you’re getting ready for the next part.]

That night, the kid was in bed and he heard... a noise... outside.

[The whole point of this story is to make the audience jump. Get quiet, take a pause, then without giving any tip-off, suddenly shout and lunge. Use your whole body, including your face; get big; stamp your foot to add volume. Try not to “telegraph” it. It should be like a great move in basketball, hockey, or boxing: sudden and devastating. This is just the first one; the big one comes at the end. If that one goes well, you’ll see people moving back from you, almost like a wave. Some of them may give out a yelp. It doesn’t always work, especially on your first attempts. Even Mark Twain found it an aggravating thing to manage sometimes. Experience will help you get better.]

“RRRRRRRRRRR!”

[If people have been laughing and going “eunnnnnn” and such, they’re a little easier to get—they’re on your rhythm. It’s easier to “get” people who are younger than you, but make sure they’re up for it. It’s mean to scare little kids who don’t want to be scared.]

“RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR
“JOHNNY GOT MY LIVER!!!!!!!!”
He heard the screen door open…

[Hand out to one side, from elbow.]

He heard the kitchen door open…

[Other hand out to the side.]

Heard’em both

[CLAP!]

Slam back together like that.
Heard it coming across the kitchen, underneath his bedroom floor.

[Pointing at the floor.]

“JOHNNY GOT MY LIVER!!!!!!!!”
Kid yells, “Pop!”

[These aren’t jumps, they’re setups for the humor of the kid’s responses. Alternate rapidly between the monster and the boy. The boy is in his bed upstairs, holding the covers under his chin. The monster shouts up through the ceiling, shaking his fist.]

“JOHNNY GOT MY LIVER!!!!!!!!”
“Pop! Cut it out!”

“JOHNNY GOT MY LIVER!!!!!!!!”
“You don’t fool me, Pop!”

“JOHNNY GOT MY LIVER!!!!!!!!”
“I AIN’T SCARED!” [Very frightened, of course.]

[Start bringing the volume down. No more jumps til the end.]

Heard it comin’ up the steps…

“Johnny GOT my... Johnny GOT my... ”
Heard it coming across the hall

“Got my LIVER... Got my LIVER... ”

[Most jump stories are about a Horrible Thing that gets closer and closer and closer until it’s finally too close. This thing is now getting too close. Very quiet now.]

Heard it stop outside his bedroom door. [Point to the door]
Saw the doorknob turn. [Little turning move with your hand]
Saw the door begin to swiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing open…
He pulled the covers over his head.

[Mime the cover move. Leave hands up there, white-knuckled. From now on, everything builds the tension. There are a couple more laughs, but they should bring little relief.]

Heard it coming across the room
[Very quietly] “Johnny got my liver...”

→
Heard it stop [still under the covers] at the head of his bed.

“Johnny got my liver...”

[Tense, fearful narrative voice; show the boy’s fingers opening; show the edge of the covers moving down.]

Felt it....
take the covers...
out of his hands...
and pull them down across his face.
—He closed his eyes.

[Close eyes. Get small laugh.]

Felt it....

[Briefly change to showing the monster. Lean over the boy—slightly to one side, and down.]

leeeeeeeaan over him
Felt its…
breath on his cheek!

[Come back up. Narrate straight to audience. Touch cheek.]

Smelt…
the “formaldehyde!”

[Get this laugh, if you can, Then, wait for a moment. Now the Horrible Thing is way too close. There are a limited number of people you want that close—next to your bed, where you can smell them—and this is not one of them!]

Heard it say

[Go back to showing the Monster again. Lean over the bed. Speak quietly, but intensely. Now almost everybody knows you’re going to try to make a jump. This makes it easier and harder—easier because they’re tense, harder because they’re on guard.]

“Johnny...”

[Pause. By getting quiet, you make them lean forward, that’s helpful. And by looking down and to the side, you are being reassuring—ob no, you’re saying, I’m not after you, I’m after this boy up here on the stage.]

“Johnny...”

[Pause. You have to get the pause just right. Mark Twain said, about another jump tale, that the final pause was the most troublesome and aggravating thing you will undertake in your life. Now, git’em!]

“GIMME MY LIVER!”

[If you try some of my suggestions, and, above all, do your best to have fun with this thing, there’s an excellent chance it’ll work—Tim Jennings]
Video

See Tim Jennings and Leanne Ponder online at:

“The Water of Life”—an entertaining Mexican folk tale about death and poverty, a contemporary variant of Grimm 044 Godfather Death, collected by Joseph Sobol in a Chicago ESL class.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwWUDKObajs

“Jackal’s Pond”—A timeless fable from India. You can see Jennings elicit an “Eeu” from the live, mixed-age audience.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mYRMPZpY5bM

Submission Guidelines for Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore

Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore is a membership magazine of the New York Folklore Society (www.nyfolklore.org). The New York Folklore Society is a nonprofit, statewide organization dedicated to furthering cultural equity and cross-cultural understanding through programs that nurture folk cultural expressions within communities where they originate, share these traditions across cultural boundaries, and enhance the understanding and appreciation of folk culture. Through Voices the society communicates with professional folklorists and members of related fields, traditional artists, and a general public interested in folklore.

Voices is dedicated to publishing the content of folklore in the words and images of its creators and practitioners. The journal publishes research-based articles, written in an accessible style, on topics related to traditional art and life. It also features stories, interviews, reminiscences, essays, folk poetry and music, photographs, and artwork drawn from people in all parts of New York State. Columns on subjects such as photography, sound and video recording, legal and ethical issues, and the nature of traditional art and life appear in each issue.

Editorial Policy

Feature articles. Articles published in Voices represent original contributions to folklore studies. Although Voices emphasizes the folklore of New York State, the editor welcomes articles based on the folklore of any area of the world. Articles on the theory, methodology, and geography of folklore are also welcome, as are purely descriptive articles in the ethnography of folklore. In addition, Voices provides a home for “orphan” tales, narratives, and songs, whose contributors are urged to provide contextual information.

Authors are encouraged to include short personal reminiscences, anecdotes, isolated tales, narratives, songs, and other material that relates to and enhances their main article.

Typically feature articles range from 1,000 to 4,000 words and up to 6,000 words at the editor’s discretion.

Reviews and review essays. Books, recordings, films, videos, exhibitions, concerts, and the like are selected for review in Voices for their relevance to folklore studies or the folklore of New York State and their potential interest to a wide audience. Persons wishing to review recently published material should contact the editor. Unsolicited reviews and proposals for reviews will be evaluated by the editor and by outside referees where appropriate. Follow the bibliographic style in a current issue of Voices.

Reviews should not exceed 750 words.

Correspondence and commentary. Short but substantive reactions to or elaborations upon material appearing in Voices within the previous year are welcomed. The editor may invite the author of the materials being addressed to respond; both pieces may be published together. Any subject may be addressed or rebutted once by any correspondent.

The principal criteria for publication are whether, in the opinion of the editor or the editorial board, the comment constitutes a substantive contribution to folklore studies, and whether it will interest our general readers.

Letters should not exceed 500 words.

Style

The journal follows The Chicago Manual of Style. Consult Webster’s Third International Dictionary for questions of spelling, meaning, and usage, and avoid gender-specific terminology.

Footnotes. Endnotes and footnotes should be avoided; incorporate such information into the text. Ancillary information may be submitted as a sidebar.

Bibliographic citations. For citations of text from outside sources, use the author-date style described in The Chicago Manual of Style.

Language. All material must be submitted in English. Foreign-language terms (transliterated, where appropriate, into the Roman alphabet) should be italicized and followed by a concise parenthetical English gloss; the author bears responsibility for the correct spelling and orthographies of non-English words. British spellings should be Americanized.

Publication Process

Unless indicated, the New York Folklore Society holds copyright to all material published in Voices. The journal of New York Folklore. With the submission of material to the editor, the author acknowledges that he or she gives Voices sole rights to its publication, and that permission to publish it elsewhere must be secured in writing from the editor.

For the initial submission, send an e-mail attachment or CD (preferably prepared in Microsoft Word and saved as Rich Text Format).

Copy must be double spaced, with all pages numbered consecutively. To facilitate anonymous review of feature articles, the author’s name and biography should appear only on a separate title page.

Tables, charts, maps, illustrations, photographs, captions, and credits should follow the main text and be numbered consecutively. All illustrations should be clean, sharp, and camera-ready. Photographs should be prints or duplicate slides (not originals) or scanned at high resolution (300+ dpi) and e-mailed to the editor as jpeg or tiff files. Captions and credits must be included. Written permission to publish each image must be obtained by authors from the copyright holders prior to submission of manuscripts, and the written permissions must accompany the manuscript (authors should keep copies).

Materials are acknowledged upon receipt. The editor and two anonymous readers review manuscripts submitted as articles. The review process takes several weeks.

Authors receive two complimentary copies of the issue in which their contribution appears and may purchase additional copies at a discount. Authors of feature articles may purchase offprints; price information is available upon publication.

Submission Deadlines

Spring–Summer issue November 1
Fall–Winter issue May 1

Send submissions as Word files to Todd DeGarmo, Voices Editor (e-mail preferred): degarmo@crauldlibrary.org or New York Folklore Society 129 Jay Street Schenectady, NY 12305

Tim Jennings has been telling folktales for a living since 1980. Recordings of live performances made with his wife, Leanne Ponder, have received American Library Association and Parents’ Choice Foundation awards. Tim and Leanne live in Montpelier, VT, with a feisty little dog and a marmalade cat. Their website is www.folktales.net. Photo courtesy of the author.
A Name to Remember

BY JOSEPH BRUCHAC

Ha-sa-no-an-da, “Leading Name.”

That is how the Seneca name of the boy, born in 1828 on a small, threatened Indian reservation in western New York, is most often rendered in English. “Open Book” and “The Reader” have also been proposed as alternative translations and are just as appropriate.

His family, the Parkers (a last name taken by Ha-sa-no-an-da’s father from a British officer who had been adopted by the Senecas)—though he would later describe them in his never-completed autobiography as “poor but honest Indians”—was a respected one and well-off by Native standards. His father owned a sawmill, and his mother was the equivalent of royalty. She was the great-granddaughter of Handsome Lake, the prophet, and a granddaughter of Red Jacket, the famous orator. She was also an important figure in the Wolf Clan to which her son belonged, since clan is inherited through the mother’s side.

Ha-sa-no-an-da, like most Native people of his generation, never knew the exact date of his birth. So, he said, comparing himself to the character of Topsy in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, who also “never had a birthday,” he was, therefore, “never related or depressed on any special day of the year.”

I’ve always loved it that he used that literary reference. Like that first name he was given, it’s an indication of how linked his life was to literature and storytelling. Writing became a central part of his life in more ways than one. Though the great fame he eventually gained was not as an author, it is hard to think of any Native American of the 19th century who did more to influence and assist the literary pursuits of others.

Ha-sa-no-an-da, that first name he was given, was not the only name he was called. Around the time that he was sent at an early age to the Baptist mission school on the Tonawanda Reservation, he became known as Ely, named after the Baptist minister, Reverend Ely Stone. “Ely,” he would say, “pronounced to rhyme with freely.” Ely S. Parker.

At the time of Ha-sa-no-an-da’s, or Ely’s youth, his Seneca people were under siege. Land companies attempted, through bribery, fraud, and physical coercion, to force the Native people of western New York from the few acres they still had left in several small reservations. (What was formerly the Buffalo Creek Seneca Reservation, for example, ended up as the city of Buffalo through a land sale document that was a total forgery.) The major reason for sending bright young men, such as Ely S. Parker, to white school was to gain the kind of education that would prepare them to fight for their people—not on the battlefield, but through letters, petitions, and direct negotiations with the politicians in Albany and Washington.

The story of Ely S. Parker’s education is a complex and interesting one. I’m actually writing a novel for young adults about it, that I’ve titled The Rising Rainbow, a reference to a dream Ely’s mother, Ga-ont-gwut-twus, had four months before his birth. In that dream, she was on the Buffalo Creek Reservation. It was winter, and snow was falling. Suddenly, the sky opened, and a rainbow appeared that arced from the reservation to the nearby farm of the former white Indian agent. Marked along its length with signs like those on the white shops in Buffalo, that rainbow was broken in the middle. When Ga-ont-gwut-twus went to the council house at Tonawanda to ask the dream interpreter the meaning of that dream, she was told that the child she was carrying would be famous as both a white man and an Indian, as a peacemaker and a great warrior. His sun would rise on Indian land and set on white man’s land, but “the ancient land of his ancestors will fold him in death.” However, it seems, the dream interpreter did not explain why that rainbow was broken.

Suffice it to say that Ely succeeded beyond anyone’s expectations. He didn’t just gain fluency in English. He became known as the most powerful orator at Yates Academy, the secondary institution he attended after leaving the small Baptist mission school. His writing and his penmanship were second to none. While still at Yates, he was delegated by his people to take that struggle to save their land onto his young shoulders, first by writing their letters to the powers-that-be, then by accompanying Seneca delegations to Albany and Washington, and finally, by becoming their primary spokesperson and tribal ambassador—all while still in his teens.

He would end up not just meeting with, but being warmly welcomed and frequently invited to the White House, by every president of his time. Polk, Taylor, Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan—Ha-sa-no-an-da knew them all. And in his adult years, he would not just be close friends with Lincoln and Grant, but would serve in Grant’s administration. By then he would be carrying another name, as well as titles earned in a white man’s war.

First, let’s step back to his earlier years and those literary contacts. The first of them came when he was 16 and in Albany accompanying three Seneca chiefs meeting with the governor. During a free afternoon, while browsing through the shelves in an Albany bookstore, Ha-sa-no-an-da was approached by a white man who asked if he was an Indian. The man was Lewis Henry Morgan, a lawyer who was fascinated with the Iroquois. When Ha-sa-no-an-da replied in the affirmative, it began a long friendship during which the young Seneca and his entire family would serve as Morgan’s primary informants for his groundbreaking book League of the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois, published in 1851. It’s a work that was aptly described by Major John Wesley Powell as the “first scientific account of an Indian tribe.” It was the start of a career that would establish Morgan as the most important American social scientist of the 19th century. And it could not have been written without Ely S. Parker.
The book’s dedication clearly indicates Ely’s central role. It reads:

To H.A.S.A.NOAN’.DA. (Ely S. Parker,) A Seneca Indian, This Work, The Materials of which are the fruit of our joint researches, is Inscribed: In Acknowledgement of the Obligations, and in testimony of the friendship of The Author.

From that first meeting with Morgan and continuing throughout the remainder of his life, Parker was the primary conduit to the white world for information about the Iroquois. In addition to his work as an indigenous diplomat—work that did culminate in preserving Tonawanda as a reservation—he was constantly researching the traditions of his Seneca people for his white friends and relaying his findings in hundreds of extremely well written letters. Among those who benefited from his diligence was Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, who was supplied by Ely with extensive information about every aspect of Seneca life. In fact, Ely wrote so extensively and so well that, had it been a later century when Native ethnologists began to publish their own work without the aid of white scholars as intermediaries, he would likely have been an author in his own right. The few pages that he did write of an unfinished autobiography bear witness to his ability as a writer and to his wry humor.

It would take a large book to adequately chronicle all of Ely S. Parker’s non-literary achievements. To date, two volumes have been written about his life. The first, The Life of General Ely S. Parker, Last Grand Sachem of the Iroquois and General Grant’s Military Secretary (Buffalo Historical Society, 1919), was written by his admiring grandnephew Arthur C. Parker. The second, William H. Armstrong’s Warrior in Two Camps: Ely S. Parker, Union General and Seneca Chief (Syracuse University Press, 1978), draws heavily on Arthur Parker’s book and supercedes the earlier volume to some degree. Both books are interesting, and I highly recommend them. However, neither Arthur Parker nor Armstrong fully explore Ely S. Parker’s truly amazing life.

His was an amazing odyssey. It includes his promising start as a lawyer’s clerk, which ended when he was told that as an Indian he was not a citizen and thus could never be a lawyer. It goes on to his being raised by his Seneca people to the position of a sachem—which gave him the new name of Do-ne-ho-ga-wa, the Keeper of the Western Door. It encompasses his work as a civil engineer in Galena, Illinois, where he met and formed a deep friendship with Ulysses S. Grant. That bond would result in his becoming Grant’s personal secretary and a Brevet General during the American Civil War. Ely S. Parker was the highest-ranking American Indian in the Union Army. He was not only present at the surrender at Appomattox, but was the one who wrote out the terms of surrender. His postwar life—which included his marriage (scandalous at the time) to Minnie Sackett, who was a much younger and quite beautiful white debutante; his service as Commissioner of Indian Affairs in President Grant’s administration, until being brought down unjustly by a scandal; his making a fortune on Wall Street and then losing it all—is a deeply dramatic story. The rainbow of Ely S. Parker’s life truly rose—and was broken—more than once.

His final years were marked by yet another literary relationship with the poet Harriet Maxwell Converse (whose husband, Frank Converse, was a musician and known at the time as “The father of the banjo”). Not long after meeting the General (as Parker was often called following the Civil War), she accompanied Parker in 1881 to Tonawanda and other Iroquois communities, beginning a connection between Converse and the Iroquois people and a friendship between her and Parker that would last throughout the rest of their lives. The letters that they wrote each other are indicative of both her interest in the Haudenosaunee and in Parker’s own intelligence and self-deprecating charm, as this one brief example from one of his letters to her shows:

On reading your last note I was greatly amused—and why? Because what I have written heretofore has been taken verbatim et literatim and a character given to which I am no more entitled than the man in the moon; I am credited with being “great,” “powerful,” and finally crowned as “good.” Oh, my guardian genius, why should I be burdened with what I am not now and never expect to be….

One of the final fruits of Ely S. Parker’s role as a guide to the literary works of others was published in 1908, five years after Converse’s death. Edited by the same Arthur Parker who would write his grandnucle’s biography and published by the New York State Museum, it was a substantial collection of traditional stories entitled Myths and Legends of the New York Iroquois.

As to that man of many names and many roles—Ha-sa-no-an-da, Ely S. Parker, Don-ne-ho-ga-wa, the General—he had reached his own rainbow’s end on August 30, 1895, while working as a clerk in the New York City police department under Frederick Grant, the late president’s oldest son.

He was interred first in Oak Lawn Cemetery in Fairfield, Connecticut, close to the home he shared with his wife Minnie and their daughter; but in 1897, he was reburied in Forest Lawn Cemetery in Buffalo, on land that had been part of the Buffalo Creek Reservation, directly under the statue of Red Jacket who is buried nearby. The ancient land of his ancestors truly folded him in death.

Joseph Bruchac is a writer, musician, and traditional Native storyteller whose work often reflects his American Indian (Abenaki) ancestry and the Adirondack Region of northern New York where he lives in the house he was raised in by his grandparents. He is the author of over 120 books for young readers and adults, including the award-winning volume OUR STORIES REMEMBER, American Indian History, Culture and Values through Storytelling. Photo by Eric Jenks.
The View at the Top of the State

BY VARICK A. CHITTENDEN

“Where is upstate? Poughkeepsie?” It’s an old joke among us who live way up north, along the border of Ontario and Quebec. That’s why we prefer to call home “the North Country” or, as some like to say, “the REAL Upstate!” I wrote the following article a couple of years ago at the invitation of a team of consultants who were working on a Corridor Management Plan for a proposed “North Country Scenic Byway.” The route follows existing secondary highways that, in some places, are a stone’s throw from our Canadian neighbors. I was asked to write “an insider’s perspective,” as both a folklorist and a lifelong resident. With my wife Judy driving and a notebook and camera in my hands, we traveled the length of the future byway. Here is what we saw:

If you’re headed to New Orleans, you can start at Rouses Point. From Lake Champlain to Lake Ponchartrain, it’s about 1600 miles on historic US Route 11. To get there from here, you will first travel through New York’s “North Country,” an auspicious beginning.

Scholars, politicians, even local residents disagree about the region’s boundaries. Some say it’s the 14 counties north of the Mohawk River or about one-third of the whole state. Others insist it’s only a few northernmost counties, and the Adirondacks are a world apart. But county and town lines, as well as the blue line that designates the “forever wild” Adirondack Park, are results of political decisions—often made by outsiders to satisfy political or economic interests—that may have little to do with the local way of life. However, no one questions the claim to the name in communities immediately adjacent to the Canadian border, where small businesses, organizations, and even government agencies describe themselves as North Woods, North Star, Tru-North, Borderline, and most commonly, North Country.

What is this place we call “the North Country,” and what makes it special? First of all, the term is not exclusively a New York State idea. It’s shared by people from Maine to Washington State. But in New York State, it’s often perceived in relation to life in “New York,” assumed by the rest of the world to be urban, wealthy, and hip. Early historical maps simply designated our region as “wild country.” Landscape plays (and has always played) a dominant role in the lives of both visitors and residents. The beauty of nature abounds. The open sky—brilliant blue on a summer day and star-studded on a clear winter night—is beyond description. The rich spring greens in May and June and the spectacular colors of autumn leaves are cherished by locals. Woods and water are our greatest natural assets. Lakes, ponds, streams, and rivers are scattered over the entire landscape. Wooded areas—from dense mountainous forests to farm woodlots and village parks and streets—are lush and ever changing.

To those who have passed through once or twice—or maybe never been here at all—the North Country may seem a little off-putting, often summed up tersely as “beautiful but cold!” Locals joke that we have four seasons—almost winter, winter, still winter, and road construction! No matter how one defines it, life in our region is remote from urban centers (our closest cities are Syracuse, Albany, Montreal, and Ottawa—a foreign capital!), and people are often remote from each other (some kids ride an hour each way to school). Although the region thrived a century ago—with growing industries, bustling small towns, and an energetic workforce—it has been slowly declining since. The poverty and unemployment rates are high, the population is aging, and young people leave, usually reluctantly, for greener pastures. The population of most northern New York counties has remained pretty constant for the last hundred years.

So, who does live here? There are descendants of New England farmers—particularly Vermonters—who first settled in the very early 19th century; and descendants of French Canadians who arrived a few decades later to work in the lumber woods or related industries. With the arrival of railroads and factories, the Irish and Italians, as well as other Europeans, found work here, and some families have stayed. Today, it’s dairy farmers, woodsmen, factory workers, public employees (education, health care, and government jobs are big), independent business operators, and retirees who call the North Country home. It’s also where young professionals have come to start their careers, fallen in love with the place, and stayed. And where people, seeking relief from conformity and city life, come back to the land to make a life that’s simple and rewarding, sometimes even becoming community leaders.

What is it then that makes the North Country such a special way of life? Ironically, the conditions that make it seem challenging for some bring out the best in others. Beginning with the first settlers, those who succeeded here took pride in their independent thinking, self-reliance, resilience, and resourcefulness. Many who followed, natives and transplants, have shown the same spirit. We treasure more elbow room and a slower pace than our city cousins have. We take great joy in living near the Adirondacks, Lake Champlain, the St. Lawrence River, and the Thousand Islands. We’re proud of our history, love the outdoors in all seasons, and take life along an international border for granted. It’s usually evident in the little things of daily life, so I invite observant travelers to keep looking and listening as you visit.

From Rouses Point to Canton—with Malone, Akwesasne, Massena, and Potsdam along the way—is 122 miles of true North Country. While for most of its great length, Route 11 runs north to south, right here it is east to west, starting with a view to the east of the Green Mountains of Vermont and ending in the agriculturally rich St. Lawrence Valley. As you go, you’ll cross several powerful rivers—the Great Chazy, the Salmon, the St. Regis, the Raquette, and the Grasse (most flow north from the high peaks of the Adirondacks to the St. Lawrence).

To many visitors along this route, life may seem small scale. There are herds of Holsteins and Guernseys on family dairy farms, with small barns and outbuildings and modest farmhouses. The hamlets and villages may boast a traffic light or two; most do not. You
An awareness of the climate and weather is ever present. Woodpiles and snow fences dot the landscape, some all year long; piles of sand and salt rise and fall around highway department garages with the seasons. Roadside markers for snowmobile trails and pickup trucks with snowplows are common sights. Nearly every community of any size sponsors some kind of winter carnival or cabin fever festival during January to March. Cemeteries have holding vaults for burials, awaiting a spring thaw. And in this land where Lake Placid is an international destination for winter sports, residents have always enjoyed outdoor winter activities—hiking, snowshoeing, skiing, and skating (snowmobiling is more recent). But ice hockey rules. From Midgets to Seniors, there’s a league for nearly everyone, male and female alike. Between Rouses Point and Canton, there are 14 regulation size hockey arenas, to say nothing of countless backyard rinks and frozen ponds. The rivalry between St. Lawrence University and Clarkson University teams and fans for local bragging rights, on and off the ice, is legendary. Summer is short and people cherish it. Lawn care and gardening, barbecues, going to camp, boating (in every vessel from Champlain sailing yachts to Rushton wooden canoes), fishing, festivals, reunions, and fairs consume people’s lives from Memorial Day to Labor Day. It’s hard to get much business done here in August.

Like the icons of American literature a century ago, small towns are the centerpieces of North Country life. Although many still have local businesses scattered about, classic downtown streetscapes—including general stores, drug stores, hardware stores, and numerous tradesmen that once thrived—have gradually disappeared. Simple country churches for several Protestant denominations and Catholic parishes have survived. And, while the old gathering places—like barber shops, Masonic or Odd Fellows lodges, and taverns— are harder to find, nearly every community has a veterans’ post and a fire hall. Today, fire and rescue squads are often the backbone of community-minded efforts to help neighbors in need. Church suppers, chicken barbecues, pancake breakfasts, chicken and biscuit dinners, and harvest suppers are commonplace for fundraisers and socializing.

The larger villages along the way have their own identities. Historically, Malone has been an agricultural town, the home of the Franklin County Fair and truck farms for potatoes, broccoli, and spinach. Massena is an industrial center, where Alcoa operates the oldest aluminum smelting and fabricating plant in the world. Since the early 20th century and the arrival of immigrant laborers, it has been the most ethnically diverse community in our region. Potsdam and Canton are college towns. Here you can find interesting restaurants, specialty grocery stores, pubs, bookstores, and cultural activities like no other in the North Country.

An interest in history is important in the North Country. Most communities have their own little historical societies and museums, where you can find anything from early handmade craftsmen’s tools to diaries and records that are a genealogist’s dream. It may be a secret to the rest of the world, but towns along this route were important to some major historical events and movements, beginning with skirmishes in the War of 1812, to secret hideaways for the Underground Railroad, rum-running across the border during Prohibition, major US Army maneuvers for World War II, and the building of the St. Lawrence Seaway in the 1950s, said by some to be one of the world’s greatest engineering achievements.

Historical markers along the trail identify sites as diverse as the winter of 1814 quarters for the American Army in Fort Covington, the Lost Dauphin Cottage in Hogansburg (home of Eleazer Williams, an Episcopal clergyman and “Missionary to Indians/Reputed to be the son of Louis XVI”), and the birthplace of William P. Rogers in Norfolk, secretary of state in the Nixon years. En route you can also find the final resting places for some celebrated Americans. To name a few: in Malone, there’s Orville Gibson, a luthier and founder of the guitar company that bears his name today, and William Wheeler, a politician and one of our least known vice presidents (for Benjamin Harrison, from 1877 to 1881); in Potsdam, Julia Crane, a pioneer in music education and founder of the Crane School of Music at SUNY Potsdam; and in Canton, Frederic Remington, a native son who became the great illustrator of the American West.

Most residents of the North Country counties take living along an international border in stride. Travel back and forth over bridge or land crossings is ordinary. Now and in the past, Canadian life has influenced people on this side of the border: local fiddlers were fans of Canadian stars they first heard on their radios in the 1930s; the first television broadcasts we received in black and white were from Ottawa and Montreal; and weekend getaways to Canada for shopping, dining, and entertainment are still a bonus for many. For most of this route,
you’re within a stone’s throw of the boundary line. At Rouses Point, some traffic signs are in French; going west, you’ll see directional signs for typical villages like Saint-Chrysostome in Quebec, just three miles distant, where over 90 percent of the population speaks only French. Outside Massena, you can cross to Cornwall in English-speaking Ontario, a small city that’s a bustling mix of heavy industry and commerce.

And, while you’re here (on both sides of the river), listen for the local dialect: “Your mother-in-law is out and about, eh?”

Along this route, too, is the rare opportunity to travel through the St. Regis Mohawk Nation—Akwesasne or “The Land Where the Partridge Drums.” This is sovereign Native American territory, and you’ll be frequently reminded by the hand-painted murals that proclaim both Mohawk identity and independence. Along the way, you can find the busy casino and bingo palace and plenty of places to buy cigarettes and gas, without state sales tax. You should also look for traditional Mohawk culture—lacrosse games at the arena, corn soup and fry bread at local eateries, beadwork, and the elegant sweetgrass baskets, for which local women have made themselves famous at the tribe’s cultural center and gift shop.

If you’re not in a big hurry, a trip across the top of New York State in any season of the year is time well spent. There’s a lot more here than wild country. Along the way, you can catch glimpses of picturesque mountains as old as time itself and sculptural windmills in a scene like futuristic fiction; of grand Victorian mansions from our Golden Age and hardscrabble farmsteads of our struggling present. The North Country is not so much a world of the past as a glimpse into the present. The North Country is not so much a world of the past as a glimpse into the present.

Abdoulaye “Djoss” Diabaté—The Seed of Mandé Tradition Germinates in the New World

BY SYLVAIN LEROUX

Abdoulaye “Djoss” Diabaté is a Malian musician born to a famous West African griot family. Little brother to the great, world-renowned singer, Kasse Mady, he grew up in the celebrated griot village of Kéla, Mali. His mother Sira Mory* was a singer who defined her generation. His mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters [In Africa, your father’s brother is your father. The same closeness applies to aunts, uncles and cousins], were, and still are, evolving at the heart of Mandé culture: the cream of the country’s instrumentalists, singers, dancers, historians, and storytellers. His extended family reads like a who’s who of Mandé music (Mali, Guinea, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Guinea Bissau).

Abdoulaye absorbed all these influences and demonstrated outstanding musical abilities at a very early age. In his late teens, he moved to Ivory Coast, as that country offered greater promise of material well being, and established residence in Abidjan where he stayed for the following 20-plus years. There, he founded Super Mandé, a group that established itself as one of the most popular bands in the area. He rubbed shoulders with artists who have since become well known, such as Salif Keita, Mory Kanté, Manfila Kanté, Ousmane Kouyaté, and more. They played weddings, parties, baptisms, and concerts, touring all over the region and neighboring countries. An LP by the group, titled Wa-babi k’e-dashi, was released in the mid-70s, but because the title track criticized some hypocritical marabouts (religious leaders), the album stirred controversy and was banned from airplay, contributing to the stifling of the band’s opportunities for greater success.

Eventually, Abdoulaye was noticed by Souleymane Koli, the choreographer and director of the world famous Ballet Koteba, and of the girl band Les Gos de Koteba, who recruited him to tour with the Ballet as a singer, and with the Gos as a guitarist. For many years, he toured Africa and the world with them.

Meanwhile, he had fallen in love (a love story that rivals Romeo and Juliet—minus the suicides), married, and was head of a growing family. Life in Africa was uncertain, and his situation with the Koteba organization, despite all the touring, did not yield substantial rewards. Therefore, in 1996, he saw an opportunity to try his luck in New York City, and he decided to take it.

The arrival in the City of this great Mandé voice stirred excitement among the African music community—everybody wanted to work with him, have him grace a track on their project, front their band, or just play with him—to be by his side when he opened his mouth and stimulated his vocal cords to produce the amazing sounds that, in this case, we deceptively refer to as singing; his vocal prowess and his personality bursting with spontaneous creativity, inevitably perking up any musical situation, generating excitement and delight.

In a short time, he became a figurehead to the Mandé griot community in the United States, a fact consecrated by his participation in the Smithsonian Folkways release Badenya: Manden Jaliya in New York City, the cover of which is graced by our protagonist’s beaming, irresistible smile. On that photo, and in person, he bears an uncanny resemblance to the greatest American musician of all times, Louis Armstrong, with whom he also shares the qualities of innovative musical talent, indomitable spirit, and an infectious joyous disposition.

As an immigrant to America, Abdoulaye
has been open to anyone who approached him and wholeheartedly dove into even the most unfamiliar musical situation, yielding some extraordinary music along the way. This has led to collaborations with artists such as Don Byron, Peter Apfelbaum, Mamadou Diabaté, Banning Eyre, Fula Flute, Source, Dallam-Dougou, Sean Noonan, Andy Algire, David Racanelli, and many others.

However, being a griot carries important social responsibilities, the highest of which are to tell the truth and inspire elevated thoughts and emotions, and defines one’s position in life, musical expression being one facet, albeit an important one, of a complex role. The Mandé word for griot is jaly, which means blood. Therefore, the griot is like the blood of the community, uniting it, nurturing it with meaning and remembrance. In an oral culture, the griot bears witness and recognizes people and their deeds for posterity, giving them reality.

In the spirit of carrying on his tradition, Abdoulaye has re-created Super Mandé in America, with whom he has brought traditional music into schools, universities, and communities across the United States. In his first traditional music release, SARA (Completely Nuts/Mulatta Records, CTN-003), Abdoulaye explores the heart of his tradition and his passion for its roots, accompanied by the finest Manden musicians in New York. Eight new tracks present the sound of praise singing, love ballads, and songs of advice and celebration, re-interpreting the tradition for the modern world.

Abdoulaye Diabaté represents, in this author’s opinion, as pristine and unadulterated a source of elevated musical expression as presently still remains on this planet. It is a joy and a privilege to experience his artistry so closely.

Abdoulaye’s CD, SARA, was the February 2012 featured selection in the New York Folklore Society’s CD-of-the-Month Voices in New York membership program. For more information about Abdoulaye, visit the New York Folklore Society’s directory of traditional artists: http://www.nyfolklore.org/tradarts/music/artist/diabate.html

*Here is a paragraph describing Sira Mory Diabaté’s artistry: Far from having a pretty voice, Sira Mory Diabaté produces a raucous and disturbing sound. Although she was an enviable singer in her youth, this griotte from Kéla was the victim of a spell, which caused her to fall ill and lose her voice. But instead of disappearing from the scene, she became the most feared and the most respected female singer in post-independence Mali. It was to her (or in her masculine guise, Banzoumana) that the national radio entrusted the announcement of grave events: wars, the death of a well-known person. “When you hear her voice, you are afraid,” said her contemporaries. But her words are unequalled in terms of their classic purity and depth. In song, she says that even a clever hairdresser is liable to make a mistake when plaiting tresses, but she can tell a story putting each word in its rightful place, so that not a single grain of the truth escapes.
A after the last class of the day finally let out, Coach Stephen Ellerbe walked through the front doors of Poughkeepsie Middle School and into a throng of students waiting eagerly in the lobby. He was immediately bombarded with shouts for his attention—“Coach!” “Ellerb!” They had been waiting for the day’s practice to begin, and some had already started going through the routine in anticipation. Ellerbe is the coach of Steppers With Class, the Poughkeepsie High School (PHS) step team. He and his high school steppers, known as “veterans,” were there to teach the middle school what they do.

Ellerbe led the crowd of students down
to the basement, where they gathered in an empty room to go over the latest news. There were permission slips that needed signing, chaperones that needed finding, and a lineup of 15 middle school steppers that he and the veterans needed to select from the 30 or so who have shown up that day. In only a week, the younger cohort would be competing at Six Flags against other step teams, and in a month, the veterans would go head-to-head against other New York State high school teams in their own auditorium. The veterans were well acquainted with the step show circuit, but for many of these younger steppers, who perform under the name Steppers With Style, this would be their first time on stage. Ellerbe wrapped up his announcements, and the veterans dispersed into the halls with their novices. For the next two hours, the basement reverberated with the rapid-fire sound of stomping feet, clapping hands, and shouting voices.

Stepping is an intricate performance art rooted in the traditions of African American Greek organizations. Begun in universities as a means of publicly expressing pride and unity for fraternities, and later sororities, stepping draws from physical and communicative patterns that can be traced to both African American folk tradition and pop culture (Fine 2003, 3). Since the stepping first emerged among Alpha Kappa Alpha fraternity brothers in the 1940s, it has played a central role in the life and legacy of many historically Black Greek organizations (Fine 2003, 11).

For African American Greeks, stepping speaks to their experience with collegiate life. The style unites its performers as people of color on campuses that are often predominantly white, as Greeks among non-Greeks, and as their specific letter organization among a sea of competitors, friends, and rivals. The central components of a step routine will typically play into these social dynamics of Greek life. Saluting, freaking, and cracking make up the three most common forms of communication in a step routine. Saluting is used as a greeting ritual, in which one group will acknowledge the other by imitation. To engage the audience and rouse enthusiasm, one stepper will often break from the group form to show off, or “freak.” Cracking, or cutting, draws upon African American folk traditions of verbal dueling to express the competitive edge of stepping. Steppers may employ a variety of cracks, from the innuendo of the folk tradition of signifying, to direct criticism, to nonverbally mocking the signature moves of a rival. Like breakdancing, rap battles, and the dozens of jokes (which some may recognize in the form of “Yo Mama” barbs), stepping is a part of a strong tradition of verbal and nonverbal dueling games that foster competition at the same time as they establish group identity among
Step routines are rarely formalized. Although groups may often learn from video recordings and written texts, choreography is mostly transmitted orally from one generation to the next (Fine 1991, 46). Steps established by one member may be carried on by a group for years after the originator leaves, often under his or her name. Steppers remember their alumni through such eponymous routines, but transmission is by no means vertical and insular. Chapters will actively engage in an exchange of steps, allowing steppers from different schools to cross-pollinate their routines (Fine 1991, 46). As steppers draw from their peers and popular culture, routines are in constant stylistic flow. Steppers are always borrowing, sampling, and referencing each other and the world around them. When they need to reference their group identity, however, steppers call upon “trade steps” shared among all chapters of their Greek organization (Fine 1991, 46). With opportunities for nationwide interaction, steppers have been able to develop these trademark steps that point to national Greek affiliations. The most well-known trade step belongs to Alpha Kappa Alpha, the oldest Black sorority. Their routine, “It’s a Serious Matter,” is highly recognizable in the stepping world and is frequently remixed into fresh material (Fine 1991, 53).

At Poughkeepsie High and Middle Schools, Coach Ellerbe’s steppers have no such higher affiliation. They have no ties to national Greek organizations, let alone to any universities. If stepping was born from Greek organizations in a collegiate setting, what does it mean for Ellerbe’s steppers to perform in middle and high schools? Does stepping take on different meanings for those sufficiently in the know to compete (Fine 1991, 48).

During the spring of 2013, Ellerbe’s teams multitasked at a dizzying rate. Every month brought a new competition; every competition brought a new permutation of routines. Their signature steps at this time were two lightly boastful routines, one done in a call-and-response style and the other performed by three groups that each chanted as one, volleying the action back and forth across the stage. In the first routine, the calls were performed by one stepper. The group’s responses are indicated in parentheses:

Now that you know who we/(Are!) We. Are not here. To stick our noses in the/(Air!) And we’re definitely. Definitely. Def-in-ite-ly, not here to kick a simple/(Step!) Now my ladies/(Girls only: Yes!)
I mean my beautiful Steppers With Style ladies/(Girls only: Yes!)
And my Alpha males with style/(Boys only: Yes!)
Are we here to bore them?/(No, no. One stepper in the group stands out and “freaks”: noooooo!)
She’s trippin’. Now my steppers break it down for me/(Oooh, aaaaah)

****

Middle group: Ice. Ice. Ice cold
Left group: Boom, ahh, do that step. A boom boom, ahh, do that step

The Steppers With Style compiled a routine outlining the accomplishments of Barack Obama’s first term in office, which praises his education initiatives and the Affordable Care Act. Outside of the collegiate context, Poughkeepsie’s steppers employ step to comment on everything from faith to politics. This is not to say that collegiate steppers do not also exercise their social consciousness through step—the Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) sorority at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill has used their performances to celebrate African civilizations and call for unity among the American Black diaspora today (Yarger 1996, 116). Yarger (1996) also observes that when the UNC Chapel Hill AKA sisters taught a routine to a group of younger girls, they turned the line “I love my AKA” into “I love being black” (116). This adaptation indicates the interchangeability of the two identities for the sorority sisters, but also the limitations of the Greek terminology for their younger counterparts. In some contexts, the sorority or fraternity unit has even acted as a restraining factor on the steppers. Official steps are often never performed outside of the privacy of the organization, except at sanctioned shows and competitions. Sorority sisters, who grew up learning steps from their older Greek relatives, report never using the steps until they,
the younger sisters, had pledged, out of respect (Rouverol 1996, 100). Step excels at group representation at every scale; but without the clear parameters of Greek affiliation, young steppers are both freed and required to put it to use for any other community of which they feel themselves to be a part.

On May 15, 2013, the Poughkeepsie teams arrived in the auditorium of their middle school to compete in Youth Step USA’s New York State High School Stepping Championship. “Upstate vs. Downstate,” on Youth Step USA’s Facebook page advertised, “The Battle for New York.” Steppers With Class, it turned out, was the only team representing “Upstate.” The rest hailed from New York City, representing schools like Brooklyn Tech and Beacon High School. The event was sparsely attended, but one school brought a marching band.

The show was opened by the president of the Mid-Hudson Valley Pan-Hellenic Council—an Alpha Kappa Alpha alumni—and then by a representative from Alpha Kappa Alpha, Inc. Every judge was soon revealed to be from a Greek organization, immediately establishing that this event belonged in the Greek-letter tradition. Since none of the competing steppers belonged to these organizations, none of the judges’ organizations were individually represented by the performances. Instead, the Greek-letter groups became one entity, together representing step as a form, college as a goal, and healthy competition as a way of life. A local community advocate took the stage next and delivered a cautionary tale of the dangers of secret online relationships. The parents in the audience voiced their agreement. While “We Are Family” played over the loudspeaker, the advocate then asked that all stand and shake the hand of a stranger in the audience, in a gesture immediately reminiscent of the Sign of Peace in many church services. Fraternities and sororities may be symbols of potential future selves for younger steppers, but Ellerbe’s steppers did not come to show unity with them. They came to represent the Hudson Valley, Poughkeepsie High School, and Steppers With Class.

Beacon’s Finest, an all-female team from Beacon High School in New York City, gave an aggressive performance with nods to stepping fundamentals: “I don’t think they realize how serious this is,” they chanted, playing off of “A Serious Matter.” Their style was more confrontational and athletic than Ellerbe’s teams, but pride was the great uniting factor. They chanted: “You must never forget/we always set the highest standards/and never settle for less.” There was an element of gender play in their performance, as they seemed to be “hard stepping,” like the more militaristic routines that defined the original male collegiate teams. Coach Ellerbe’s wife confided that she wished the PHS team were less “soft,” but she didn’t know why they didn’t step more aggressively. “That’s just the way we are,” she said. The PHS steppers have no rivalries with other schools in the state, which may lead them to choose softer technique and humor over aggression.
The Future K’s, from Queens, opened with a comedic skit. Although they used female actors for their skit, the actual steppers were all male. They used sticks in their routine, beating the ground emphatically. Next up were the Lady Dragons from Brooklyn Tech, who incorporated Middle Eastern motifs in their costume and hand motions. They used their routine to honor Scheherazade of Arabian Nights: the princess who saved herself and didn’t need a man. Their male counterparts from Brooklyn Tech performed next, using comedy in their skits and routine as well. They incorporated marching patterns into their steps and lived up to the hard-stepping routine they promised, when they chanted that they were “back to make the stage crack.”

The Steppers With Class performed last, using their Wizard of Oz anti-drug skit. “We keep it so drug free,” they proclaimed. In contrast with their competitors, the Steppers With Class were the only mixed-gender group, and the only women to use humor in their routine. They were also the softest steppers, and the least boastful. Their third-place ranking that night suggested that hard, aggressive stepping and chanting was a bigger crowd pleaser, but the MC singled out the message of their performance for commendation at the end. Ellerbe and the steppers chose the drug-free performance for commendation at the end.

Fundamentally, stepping is about representation and the strength of the group. As it moved into secondary schools and youth groups, it has proven itself to be capable of thriving outside the structure of Greek-letter organizations. Along with the other competitors at the championship, the Steppers With Class demonstrated that the full range of stepping technique, tradition, and innovation has been carried down to non-Greek teams; however, without the structure and rivalries of the Greek system, their steps derive their meaning from the sociopolitical environments that surround them in their schools, churches, and streets. Although the sorority or fraternity unit might serve collegiate steppers as a signifier for these same experiences, high school steppers may need to be a bit more explicit. Fraternities and sororities serve as a reference point that step can always return to, but its central ethos translates without difficulty, and with great possibility, to any group seeking a means of self-representation, community pride, and mutual support. 

References
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Mark Swanberry is a traditional artist who works primarily with copper and stone, creating art big and small, from copper candlesticks, wall hangings, hand-pounded bowls, to bas-relief stone carvings, birdbaths, and fireplaces. He draws his inspiration from the beauty and harmony that he sees in the boreal forest and strives to incorporate the philosophy of feng shui in his work. Many of his smaller pieces can be purchased in our Gallery at 129 Jay Street, Schenectady, NY, or online at www.nyfolklore.org/gallery/store/folkart.html.


Image 2: Copper candlestick holder, with copper leaf embellishments surrounding the base. Available in the Gallery.


Mark Swanberry, demonstrating dry wall construction and other stonework during an artist's residency at the Schoharie River Center, Esperance, NY. Photo by Ellen McHale.