

# THE RANSOMVILLE SPEEDWAY:

*History, Community, and Culture at a Dirt Track*

SEPTEMBER 12, 2021 - APRIL 8, 2022







Photograph of Jayme Stone (#75) battling for position against Jeff Anstett (#61) during a race at the "Little R", the nickname for the Thursday night kart races at the Ransomville Speedway (the "Big R"). Photo by Tom Stevens, 2019.

## Exhibit Overview

The soaring engines and roaring crowds;  
split-second decisions and watchful eyes.

Everywhere you turn at a dirt track, you experience the unique artistic expression of history, community, and culture in the workplace: also known as occupational folklife.

The Ransomville Speedway in Ransomville, New York is one of the most storied dirt tracks in the state, and was first founded in the 1950s by a group of local racers that started a club known as the Ransomville Slowpokes.

Today, the Ransomville Speedway remains one of the most important continuously operating community spaces in Niagara County, and a hotbed of cultural expression: from narratives and customs to foodways and skilled techniques.

Cultural knowledge at a dirt track can be found across its many positions: crew teams, concession stand workers, pit stewards, starters, management, drivers, photographers, scorers, race directors, maintenance workers, and more.

Through an Archie Green Fellowship awarded by The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress in 2020, Edward Millar (Curator of Folk Arts at the Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University) partnered with Jenn Martin, Jeff Anstett, and Tom Stevens to conduct interviews with workers, drivers, and race teams at the Ransomville Speedway: helping tell and preserve its story in a national archive.

A story of history, community, and culture: a story about people.

## Putting the Work in Artwork

When we think of culture, we might picture something traditional that expresses who we are. Maybe it is a traditional food like paczki, a traditional dance like céili, or even a traditional art like quilting.

But did you know that we also create and express culture when we work?

**Occupational folklife** is the term researchers use for describing the cultural knowledge created and expressed in a workplace. This includes things like stories and slang, technique (how to do something) and specialized knowledge, customs, and more.

This kind of cultural knowledge might look like an exchange of stories between firefighters in a break room about a recent response to a fire, the technique of farmworkers picking and packing crops at harvest, or the orchestrated movements of line cooks in a commercial kitchen.

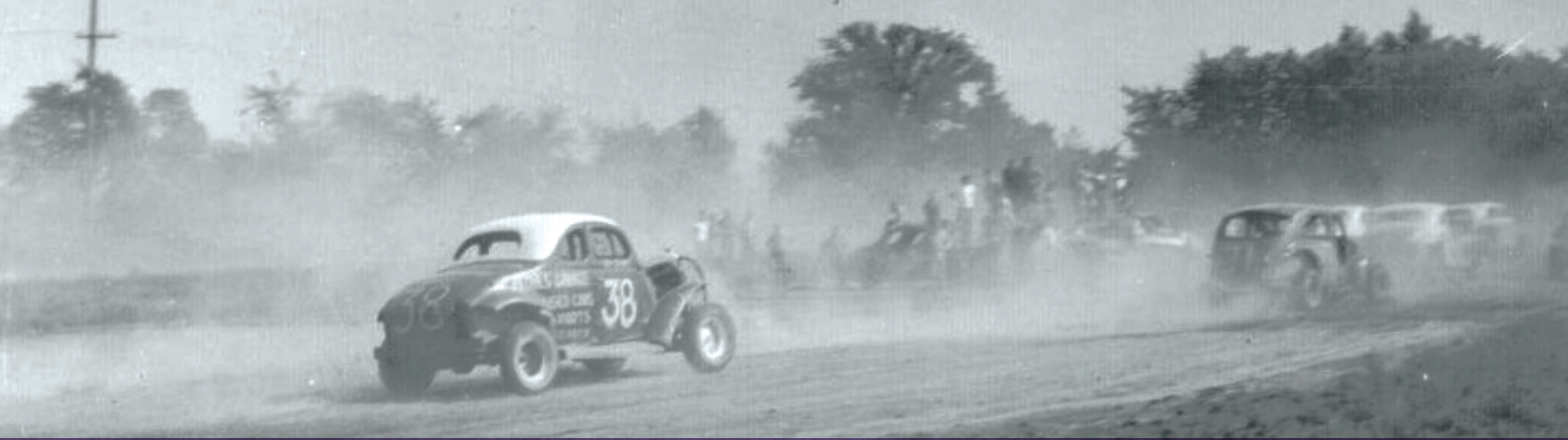
Dirt tracks are a great example of a workplace where multiple forms of occupational folklife come together to help make one event happen.

From race teams to admissions, to management and concessions, to announcers, pit stewards, scorers and more: everything comes together to put on a successful race.



Sunset at the Ransomville Speedway. Photo by Tom Stevens, 2021.





# hiSTORY

Undated photograph of an early race at the original Ransomville Speedway behind then Pedro Motors (now Ed's Garage): this photograph was likely taken sometime between 1955 and 1957. Photo courtesy Jipp Ortiz, n.d.

## 1954-55

Formation of the local racing club, the Ransomville Slowpokes, by a group of local racers including Ed Ortiz, Douglas Ortiz, Richard Cantara, Bill Cantara, Donald Reese, Richard McCollum, Robert Myers, Richard Cain, and John Clement.

The Ransomville Slowpokes establish the Ransomville Speedway, in a field behind Pedro Motors (now Ed's Garage).

## 1955

## 1958

A new track for the Ransomville Speedway is opened on Braley Road (its current location).

Harry Schultz, a local Ransomville businessman, acquires majority ownership of stock in the Ransomville Speedway, and takes over operations.

## 1962

## 1973

Stan Friesen and Kurt Uhl of Ontario, Canada, purchase the Ransomville Speedway, with the Friesen family going on to manage the track for the next 42 years.

The Friesen family sells the track to Parm Atwal, and the following years see further updates to facilities including the installation of a Jumbotron, new suites, tech barn, concession stand, pit pads, and more.

## 2015

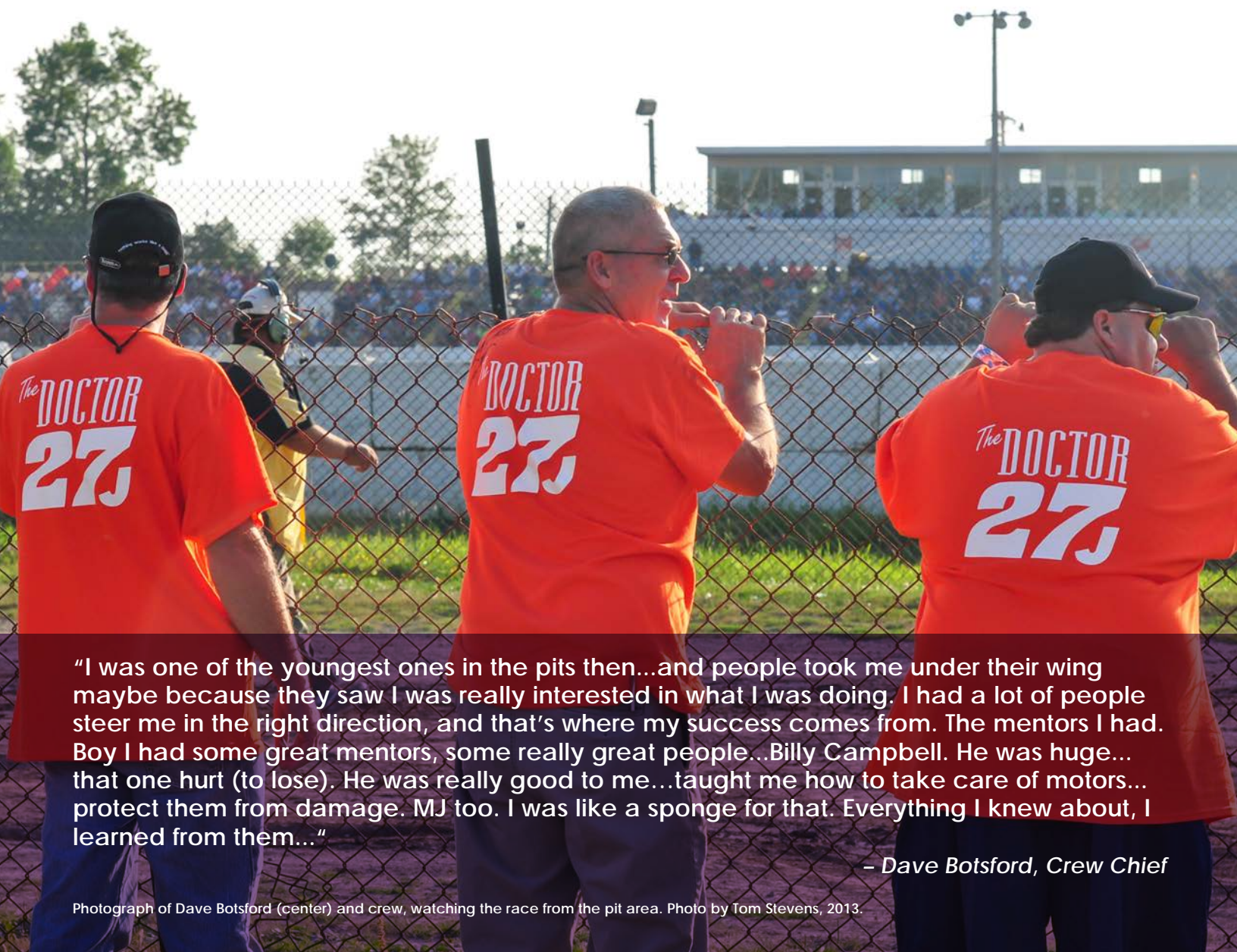
# The Heart of a Track

Beneath the exterior of roaring engines and the clouds of dirt kicked up each turn is the heart of what keeps every dirt track going: community.

**Community** is the sense of belonging people feel with one another based on shared interests, experiences, beliefs, and more. It can look like family, friends, coworkers, and other people that we identify with.

Watching or participating in a race at the Ransomville Speedway is a shared experience between fans, officials, workers, drivers, and their teams: a catalyst for where community feeling can form.

When people come together in this way, they create something known as **folk culture**: the informal expression of the shared interests, values, customs and beliefs that bind them together as a group. These can range from just the shared experience of watching from the bleachers or the expected etiquette for a race team or visitors in the pit.



"I was one of the youngest ones in the pits then...and people took me under their wing maybe because they saw I was really interested in what I was doing. I had a lot of people steer me in the right direction, and that's where my success comes from. The mentors I had. Boy I had some great mentors, some really great people...Billy Campbell. He was huge...that one hurt (to lose). He was really good to me...taught me how to take care of motors...protect them from damage. MJ too. I was like a sponge for that. Everything I knew about, I learned from them..."

- Dave Botsford, Crew Chief



## DIRT CULTURE



Photograph of Derek Wagner (#61) and Scott Kerwin (#1 in Bubby Pawlak's Sportsman) battling for first during a race at the Ransomville Speedway. Photo by Tom Stevens, 2019.

From stories and toolboxes to flat dogs and vehicle wraps, **wherever you turn at the Ransomville Speedway culture is happening.**

Culture refers to the knowledge, values, traditions and ideas embedded in each and every one of us: it is the lens through which we view the world.

**Narratives are stories** we tell that share knowledge specific to our culture and community: like how to do something or why we might believe something.

This might look like a driver describing something in their feature race afterwards with their crew, or a concession stand worker sharing a precautionary story to teach a new staff member how to use a deep fryer.

"A right rear tire is going to be bigger than the left wheel tire in circle track racing...in a sense **they're fighting one another, that's the reaction** that's happening to help the car rotate through the corner. On a street car, your tires are going to be all the same size cause primarily you're going in a straight line. But on a dirt track? Yeah you're going down a straight away so far...but we don't win races like drag races, we don't win down a straightway. We win through the corners."

*– Derek Wagner, Sportsman Driver*

One of the most visible forms of cultural expressions in the workplace, especially in hands-on trades, is **technique**.

Technique is the informal body of traditional work knowledge created by working: in other words, **the (right) way something is done.**

**Food is about more than eating:** it can be a taste that inspires a memory or a dish that marks an important life transition.



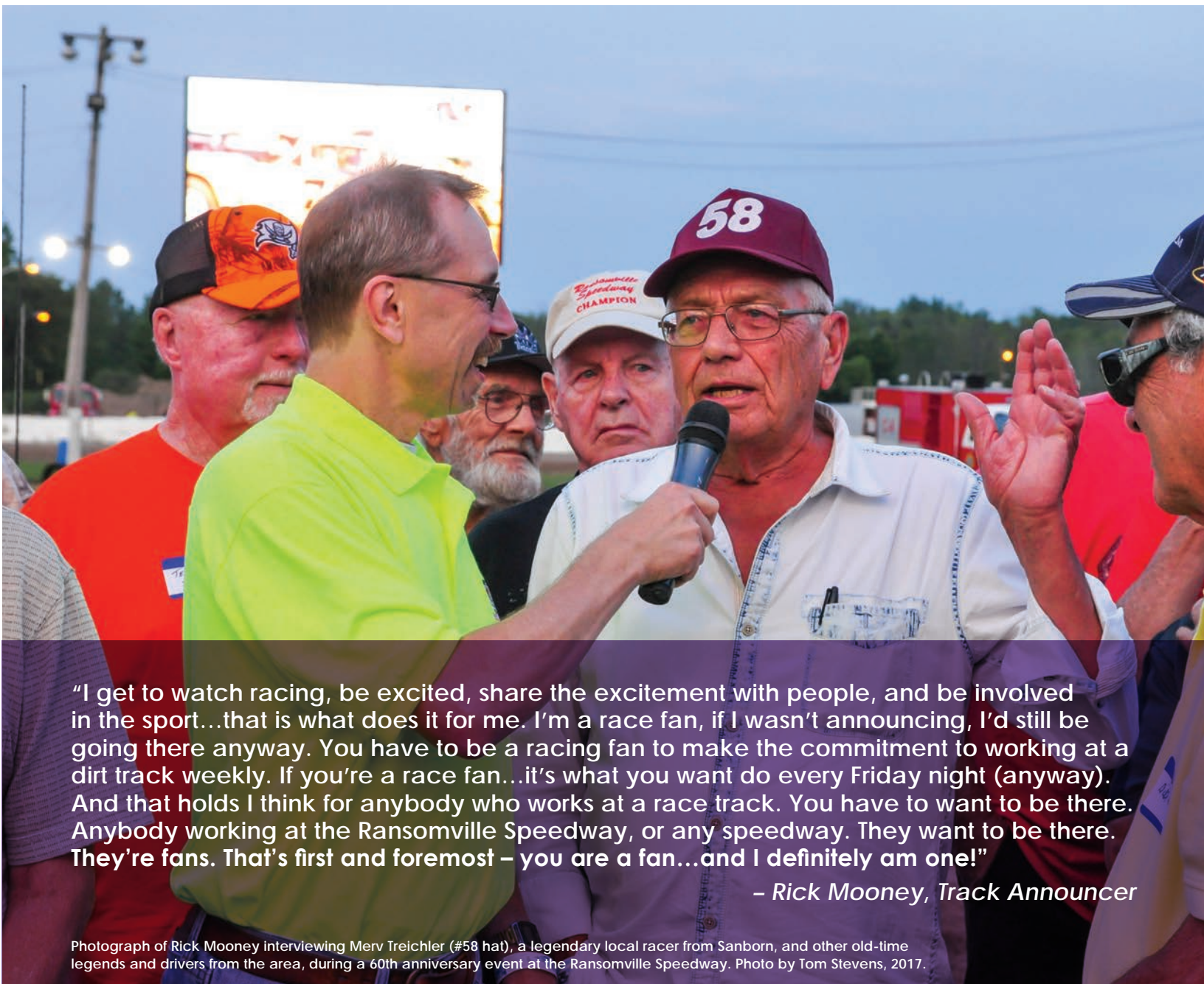
Foodways is the word we use to describe everything, food: from how it's made and how recipes are learned, to what is eaten and more.

**Customs**, or habitual actions, **are** an important part of community identity, providing **a regular, recognizable expression of shared culture**.

At the Ransomville Speedway, this might look like what a driver does before every race or the order in which track techs review a vehicle for rule compliance.

**Artistic expressions**, like a vehicle aesthetic (what it looks like) or vocal flourishes (like an announcer's delivery), **mark the individual in a shared experience**.

A vehicle wrap is the unique graphic design you find on race cars, which is usually made up of the driver's number and their sponsors, over a decorative background. This helps with announcers in identifying racers during a race as they speed around a track.



"I get to watch racing, be excited, share the excitement with people, and be involved in the sport...that is what does it for me. I'm a race fan, if I wasn't announcing, I'd still be going there anyway. You have to be a racing fan to make the commitment to working at a dirt track weekly. If you're a race fan...it's what you want do every Friday night (anyway). And that holds I think for anybody who works at a race track. You have to want to be there. Anybody working at the Ransomville Speedway, or any speedway. They want to be there. They're fans. That's first and foremost – you are a fan...and I definitely am one!"

– Rick Mooney, Track Announcer

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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And finally, thanks to my wife and daughter for their patience and accommodation with my extra time away and haphazard hours.

## TEXT & FIELDWORK

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Visit the Occupational Folklife Project by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress to hear full interviews and view photographs from the *Ransomville Speedway: Dirt Track Workers in Western New York* collection, collected through an Archie Green Fellowship awarded in 2020.



Want to see what dirt track racing is all about? Visit the Ransomville Speedway's website for an up to date racing schedule.

*The Ransomville Speedway: History, Community, and Culture at a Dirt Track is made possible in part through an Archie Green fellowship from the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress; the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature; Niagara University; Ed's Garage; Jenn Martin, Jeff Anstett, Tom Stevens, and the Ransomville Speedway.*

*Front cover photo: Ryan 'Mr. Peanut' Plante (92) and Cole Susice (98) battling for position during a Mini Stock race at the Ransomville Speedway. Photo by Tom Stevens, 2019.*

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