

METAL ROAD

VIEWER DISCUSSION GUIDE



Top: Navajo workers replace steel rails on the Santa Fe railway. Photo from Kansas State Historical Society.

Above: Navajo father and son railroad workers, Thomas (left) and Burt Carter. Photo by Kahlil Hudson (Alaska Native)

Right: Navajo Steel Gang work on the railroad on a cold day. Photo from Union Pacific Museum.



Program Synopsis

For decades, thousands of Navajos worked the railroads maintaining the trans-continental network. *Metal Road* explores the dynamics of livelihood, family and the railroads with a Navajo trackman. *Metal Road* enters the world of Navajo families amid history of railroad work by the 9001 Heavy Steel Gang. Replacing rails on more than 64,000 miles of track, the unknown journey of Navajo trackmen in the United States reveals an invisible group of workers striving to earn retirement benefits and inspires us to rethink the American work ethic.

In Their Words

"The kind of work that we do fits the kind of life the Navajos live. They are a very rough, tough people. Extremes do not affect them the way extremes affect other people."

— Thor, railroad supervisor

The Navajo Nation is the largest reservation in the country, covering 27,673 square miles within three states



Producer Comments



Sarah Del Seronde (Diné)

I wanted to make *Metal Road* to shed light on two related, yet often hidden issues: manual labor in the U.S. and Native American histories.

Laborers are often the most economically oppressed people doing infrastructure jobs, but the

workers are strong and resilient. My hope is their labors will no longer go unnoticed.

In making *Metal Road*, I gained a better understanding of the work ethic and loyalty that lies dormant inside some of us, particularly in Navajos who live in areas with very high unemployment rates. When given the opportunity, they prove themselves to be skillful additions to any workforce. Compared to the men and women in the film, my focus and willpower are fleeting.

It was brutal work to film them preparing to work in the freezing temperatures at 3 a.m. In making a film about railroader life, I wanted to reconcile our Native histories with contemporary Navajo heroes who grind out a living every day. People talk about having the courage to try new things, new careers, etc. But what about the courage to put in your time into one job? Yes, taking those first steps to work is important and it lifts up the soul in self-worth, but it's the ten thousandth step that counts.

Maybe one day the minimum time for laboring 30 years outside with dangerous machines and loud noises will be decreased, because now you must meet the same qualifications as an office worker in the same company striving for retirement benefits.

As a Navajo filmmaker, I wanted to show the viewer that the next Indian you see at a gas station in oil-stained clothes might be returning from a 17-hour shift that keeps the world's largest transportation system operating.

By The Numbers

1. The Navajo Nation is the largest reservation in the United States, situated on over 27,000 square miles of land within the states of Arizona, New Mexico and Utah.
2. The population of the Navajo Nation is approximately 180,000 people.
3. The unemployment rate on the Navajo Nation is 42%, although many still live more traditional lives raising sheep and farming their land.
4. For those 25 years and older, 56 percent hold high school diplomas and only 7 percent hold college degrees.
5. The number of housing units on the Navajo Nation is nearly 69,000 homes, of which 15,279 have complete plumbing facilities.
6. The Navajo Treaty of 1868 established the Navajo Nation tribe as a sovereign nation.
7. Since 1989, the Navajo Nation has governed itself using a three-branch system of government complete with an Executive, Judicial and Legislative branch.
8. Treaty of 1868 mandates in Article IX that the Navajos agree to not attack or oppose construction of railroad across the continent.

Railroad Trivia

1. The work crews or "steel gangs" numbered from 80 to 120 men, who in unison lifted each rail onto the tie plates, spiked them down, bolted them together, and then, moved on to the next joint, 39 feet away.
2. Oak ties, 6 to 8 feet long and weighing about 150 pounds apiece were set on to the ballast approximately a foot apart, yielding an estimated 5,200 ties per mile.
3. Anything that created a rise of more than 3 feet for each 100 feet of length had to be leveled, since 19th century locomotives and the physics of a steel wheel on a steel rail could not negotiate anything steeper than a 3 percent grade.
4. The steel rails, each 39 feet long, weighing more than a ton each, were set atop the plates and ties. The rails were 39 feet long because the cars that carried them from the mainline were 40 feet long, leaving 6 inches on either end of the rail car for securing them in transit.
5. The 18-mile line between Lamy and Santa Fe, New Mexico took about seven months to complete. It had 19 bridges, 55 curves and a ruling grade of about 3.5 percent.

Discussion Questions

1. Traditionally, the Navajo people worked the land, raised animals and stayed close to home. Discuss what impact the early generations of railroad workers may have had, both positive and negative, on individuals, families, communities and the local economy.
2. In the film the railroad supervisor, Thor, says about the Navajo people, "They are a very rough, tough people. Extremes do not affect them the way extremes affect other people." Discuss whether this may be perceived as a generalization or stereotype or if you feel there could be truth in this statement based on genetic makeup or the history of the Navajo people. Explain your beliefs and ideas.
3. Structural violence refers to systematic ways in which social structures harm or otherwise disadvantage individuals. Despite years of service many Navajo railroad workers do not qualify for retirement or other benefits. Compare this fact with other industries in which the laborer is underserved by the companies that employ them. Often it is hard to see structural violence, so how does one see changes being made?
4. Navajo men and women hired on to railroad jobs are sometimes gone for weeks or months at a time and travel great distances. How must the people left at home adapt? How could being outside of their community change or alter the railroad worker's view of the world? What adaptations would they need to make both when leaving and when returning home?
5. The history we learn in school from the textbooks is often a very different picture than the reality of that time period particularly for minority groups. Prior to seeing this film, did you know that three generations of Navajo men and women helped to build and continue to help maintain the American railway system? Explore and discuss your beliefs and observations about how history is recorded in our textbooks. How can we obtain an accurate view of history? What steps do we need to take?
6. The film opens with a quote about "any number of Indians employed on the road." The U.S.-Mexico Labor Bracero Program employed thousands of agricultural and railroad laborers in the Southwest. Identify who worked to build and maintain the railroads. Why are the least desirable and most dangerous jobs performed by economically oppressed peoples? How does this continue today?
7. The Paternalistic Triangle between Trading Post System, Railroad Retirement Board and the railroads used the Navajo Nation as its personal labor pool. How does this wage labor exploitation parallel other situations across the United States? Discuss the role of the Indian Trader to "go round up some Navajos" and the authority Trading Posts had over Navajo livelihood.



Navajo Steel Gang eat together in the lunch car. Photo from Union Pacific Museum.

Suggested Activities

1. Explore why building the transcontinental railroad connection was such an important phase of American growth. Identify at least three ways that it changed broader American society and at least three ways that working on this railroad may have changed the lives of the Navajo workers and their families.
2. Research the economic structure of the Navajo reservation. What are the primary economic supports, employment, annual income, etc.? Compare the structures to the county and state in which you live. Identify the differences and similarities.
3. What are the "four sacred mountains" that are mentioned in the film and why are they significant to the Navajo culture? Identify the important Navajo stories that are associated with these four mountains and then create a map of Navajo land that includes these mountains.
4. In the film, Raymond says his elders told him "one day you will be able to build a house." On his days off from the railroad, Clifford Long is building his house without any help, and Carter lives in a home without electricity. Explore this motivation in Navajo communities and other Native communities to own a home. Many homes on the Navajo Nation still do not have electricity or running water in 2017. Identify what historical or other factors may have contributed to this serious issue in Native communities.
5. Research the construction of the American transcontinental railroads and create a timeline of its progress across the country. What different railroads merged and how many years did it take to connect East to West? Now mark on the timeline the Long Walk, when the Navajo Nation was created and when railroads began to hire Navajo workers. What railroad companies hired Navajo workers, and why?

Resources

Web Resources

Facebook/MetalRoadFilm

Twitter: @MetalRoadFilm

www.metalroadfilm.com

www.navajo-nsn.gov/

<http://newlaborforum.cuny.edu/2012/01/30/working-on-the-railroad-walking-in-beauty-the-voices-of-navajo-railroad-workers/>

By the Numbers

<http://navajobusiness.com/fastFacts>

Treaty of 1868

<http://reta.nmsu.edu/modules/longwalk/lesson/document/treaty.htm>

RailRoad Trivia

<http://newmexicohistory.org/people/coming-of-the-iron-steed>

Source of map

<http://navajobusiness.com/fastFacts/LocationMap.htm>

Books

Working on the Railroad, Walking in Beauty: Navajos, Hozho, and Track Work by Jay Youngdahl, Utah State University Press, 2011.

The Work of Sovereignty: Tribal Labor Relations and Self-Determination at the Navajo Nation by David Kamper, SAR Press, 2010.



Navajo Trackmen work together to make the rails even. Photo from Union Pacific Museum.

A Navajo Legacy: The Life and Teachings of John Holiday by John Holiday and Robert McPherson, University of Oklahoma Press, 2005.

Working the Navajo Way: Labor and Culture in the Twentieth Century by Colleen O'Neill, University of Kansas Press 2005

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This Viewer Discussion Guide was developed by Jamie Lee, an author and former instructor at the Oglala Lakota College, where she taught for five years. Lee has a master's in human development and has been a communications trainer and an educator for the past 30 years. Her stories and articles have appeared in *The South Dakota Review*, *Winds of Change Magazine* and several other anthologies. She has published three non-fiction books, a novel and a collection of writings from Oglala Lakota College students. Her first novel, *Washaka: The Bear Dreamer*, was a PEN USA finalist in 2007. Lee has written more than 70 documentary programs, including Public Radio's landmark 52-part Native music series, *Oyate Ta Olowan: The Songs of the People*.

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Educational resources for this film are available at <http://www.visionmakermedia.org/educators/metal-road>

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