

• VIEWER DISCUSSION GUIDE •

To Brooklyn and Back: A Mohawk Journey



“Growing up in Kahnawake, we’ve always been proud of the men who worked high steel, but it was the women in my family—and my grandmother Ida Meloche, in particular—who taught me the most about the Brooklyn community. I wanted to tell their story and to honor their vital role in our history and culture.”

—Reaghan Tarbell,
Writer/Director



As early as the turn of the century and continuing until today, Mohawks from Kahnawake, Quebec, regularly found construction work in the booming metropolis of New York. Many settled there, forming a unique subculture of urban Indians in the heart of Brooklyn until the 1960s.

While the men were scraping the skies over Manhattan as ironworkers, the women—inheritors of a matriarchal tradition—kept their feet firmly on the ground, raising families, holding down jobs of their own, and keeping the community connected and the culture alive.

In *To Brooklyn and Back*, Tarbell retraces the steps of her grandmother Ida Meloche, who arrived in New York during the Depression. Warm memories blend with the bittersweet as women talk about losing men to the perilous high steel life and as present-day Kahnawakeros prepare to commemorate the 1907 Quebec Bridge disaster, a tragedy that claimed 33 Kahnawake men.

This guide is designed to encourage deeper exploration and conversations about the importance of community, place, family, work, determination, history and shared tragedy in shaping and sustaining culture and a sense of identity.

PRODUCER'S NOTES



Reaghan Tarbell Writer/Director

As a kid, I knew that men from Kahnawake were renowned for their ironworking skills and that they helped build the skylines of some of the largest cities in North America, but what I didn't know until years later was that several small blocks in downtown Brooklyn were a temporary home away from home for hundreds

of Mohawks from my reserve of Kahnawake. The more I learned about the community, how it was even referred to as Little Caughnawaga, the more fascinated I became. I wanted to hear from the women and children who once called Brooklyn home and about my own family's connection to New York. A connection spanning 55 years and ultimately a cycle that continues with me.

I think if you're destined to tell a story it will find you somehow. Telling the story about my family and my community was, at the same time, the most challenging and most rewarding time of my life.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

- 1. Family Stories of Place:** Ask your parents or other family members about where they grew up. Was it the community or home of their parents or did their parents move away from a family or cultural home? Find out how the community or neighborhood they grew up in impacted their life. What were some of the distinguishing factors of the place they grew up? What were the family or neighborhood traditions?
- 2. Creating Digital Stories:** Ask family members about professions, cultural traditions, language, or difficulties that shaped their lives. Write a story, create a recording, or digital story to share with other family or community members. Find information on digital stories at the Center for Digital Storytelling, <http://www.storycenter.org> or to develop an electronic collage, visit Animoto at <http://animoto.com>.
- 3. History of Place:** Find out the history of places in your community that are important to you or that bring people together, such as parks, community centers, restaurants, bars, churches, mosques, or synagogues. Ask relatives and long time residents as well as researching online or in books. Share that history with others through a blog entry, social networking, a web site, letters to the editor or in conversation.

INTERESTING FACTS

- Lenape and Mohawk Indians were the first inhabitants of Brooklyn, NY.
- Historians point to Mohawks' experience building long houses as a precursor to their steelwork on high rises.
- Mohawks who were active in the timber trade learned to run along moving log rafts, contributing to their dexterity and balance.
- Mohawks migrated from bridge building to working on high rises in the early 1900s, partly due to a shortage of jobs for bridge builders in Canada and partly because Kahnawake women didn't want to lose more men to disasters like the collapse of the Quebec bridge.
- Mohawk ironworkers helped build the Empire State Building, Rockefeller Center, the United Nations and the Verrazano Bridge.
- Mohawk ironworkers helped build the World Trade Center and dismantle it after 9/11.

DELVE DEEPER

- 1. In the 1930s, Reaghan Tarbell's grandmother, Ida Meloche, moved from Kahnawake to Brooklyn to work as a maid. Her mother and sisters later joined her. In the film, Tarbell said that "no one forgot where they came from and everyone tried to help each other out, especially because it was the Depression." Ida and her family took in boarders and shared meals with those coming into town for work.**

Have you ever experienced the sense of community that formed among the Mohawk's in Brooklyn in the 1930s? How do you feel the sense of community and identity—as described in the film—has changed since the 1930s? How have new technologies impacted family connections and communities? What qualities do communities, like Little Caughnawaga, have that communities of today don't and vice versa?

- 2. Nancy Deer said being the daughter of an ironworker was normal, "it's part of our men and what they do."**

How has the tradition of ironworking shaped the Mohawk culture? Is there a profession that has been passed down in your family? Do you feel any sense of responsibility to carry on a family tradition of work? Would you like to go into the same field of work as a parent or family member or see your child go into the field you are in? If so, why? If not, why not?

- 3. Cultures and communities, like Kahnawake, have changed and evolved as economic, political, environmental, and sociological changes take place. Producer Reaghan Tarbell, who lived in Kahnawake until she was 20 years old, explains that "as a result of the ironworking trade, the reserve has an American feel to it. You'll hear more New York accents than French."**

How has the community, culture or family you were born into changed over your lifetime? What do you wish was the same and what changes do you celebrate? How have the places you've lived shaped or defined you and/or your family members? Where do you feel most "at home" and why?

- 4. Bars, restaurants, churches and parks serve as gathering places for communities. In Little Caughnawaga, neighborhood bars, such as the Spar and Wigwam Bars, were where Mohawk ironworkers often gathered after work to let off steam and socialize. On Sundays, the Cuyler Church brought Mohawks together for services conducted in the Mohawk language.**

Where and how does your "community" (of culture, religion, family, friends) come together? What is the history of some of your favorite neighborhood places? What cultures were represented in your neighborhood, prior to your generation? How did the people and cultures that preceded your generation shape your neighborhood?

- 5. While Mohawk was spoken in Little Caughnawaga, most parents chose not to pass it on to their children. This was primarily because of the trauma they experienced at residential schools where Indian children were often beaten for speaking their native language. When Ida Meloche died, Kahnawake lost one of the few remaining Mohawk speakers in their family. Adults in Kahnawake, however, are now learning the Mohawk language.**

How far back in your family tree did your ancestors speak their native language? If your family no longer speaks that language, what do you attribute to its demise? What was lost when the language was lost? Are there phrases or words from that language that are still used? If so, what are they and what do they mean to you or your family? How does it feel when you hear your native language or the language of your ancestors?

- 6. The Quebec Bridge disaster of 1907 took a huge toll on the Kahnawake community. Thirty-three Kahnawake men died. It was a loss so devastating, the widows decreed men would no longer all work on the same job. This led to Kahnawake ironworkers "booming out" to work in locations around the country, including Brooklyn, where the community of Little Caughnawaga took shape.**

How do disasters or difficulties change and define us as individuals, as a community and as a culture? Discuss the role Kahnawake women played in reshaping the community after the 1907 bridge collapse or in the development of Little Caughnawaga.

RESOURCES

FILMS

High Steel

1965, 13:00, Canada
 Director: Don Owen
http://www.nfb.ca/film/high_steel/

Spudwrench: Kahnawake Man

1997, 58:00, Canada
 Director: Alanis Obomsawin (Abenaki);
 Producer: Alanis Obomsawin (Abenaki)
 Produced by: National Film Board of Canada
<http://www.nfb.ca/film/spudwrench-kahnawake-man-clip-1/>

BOOKS

Joseph Mitchell, **Up in the Old Hotel and Other Stories.**
 New York: Vintage Books: A Division of Random House, Inc., 1993.

Jim Rasenberger, **High Steel: The Daring Men Who Built the World's Greatest Skyline.**
 New York: HarperCollins, 2004.

CHILDREN'S BOOK

Kirk, Connie Ann and Hale, Christy, Skydancers.
 New York: Lee & Low Books, Inc., 2004.

RADIO

NPR's All Things Considered, "Lost and Found Sound," Mohawk Ironworkers, Walking High Steel
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1145947>

PHOTOS

Quebec Bridge Disaster
http://www.civeng.carleton.ca/Exhibits/Quebec_Bridge/intro.html

MUSEUM EXHIBIT

Smithsonian Institution Exhibit, "Booming Out"
 (Note: If your community or organization would like to bring this exhibit to your area, it is available for \$3,500.)
http://www.sites.si.edu/exhibitions/exhibits/archived_exhibitions/booming/main.htm

DIGITAL STORYTELLING

Center for Digital Storytelling
<http://www.storycenter.org/>

Animoto
<http://animoto.com/>

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River of Renewal is a Pikiawish Partners Production, in association with Specialty Studios, © 2008.



Funding for River of Renewal and this viewer discussion guide was provided by Native American Public Telecommunications (NAPT), with major funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). Additional funding from the LEF Foundation, the Jewish Foundation of Nashville, Nu Lambda Trust, and the California Council of the Humanities. This guide was developed by Bodie & Kovitz Communications, www.bodieandkovitz.com.



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