

Voices from the Barrens

NATIVE PEOPLES, BLUEBERRIES, AND SOVEREIGNTY

A documentary by Nancy Ghertner



Each August, First People from the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet tribes – the Wabanaki from the maritime provinces of Canada – travel across the international Canadian-USA border to participate in the tradition of hand raking wild blueberries with their Wabanaki brothers and sisters – the Passamaquoddy of Maine. The Wabanaki do not describe this seasonal “agricultural labor” as work, but as part of the harvest from the earth, part of a visit to the blueberries of Maine’s barrens.



The rakers live in camps at the tribal-owned company, where they participate in the largest wild blueberry harvest in the world. The film’s conversations in the cabins and experiences with rakers in the fields are interspersed with stunning views of the glacial barrens of Down East Maine. In the recent years of this harvest, the economic pressures of a global food economy threaten this tradition, as mechanical harvesting has become the dominant form of harvesting the blueberries.



The Wabanaki People are known as the “People of the Dawnland.”

They are an indigenous First Nations people from five nations: The Abenaki, the Maliseet whose traditional name is Wolastoqiyik, the Mi'kmaq, the Passamaquoddy, and the Penobscot. Their heritage and their lands are within the regions today known as Maine, New Hampshire and the Canadian Maritimes. They are descendants of those who inhabited these lands long before recorded history. Wabanaki have closely related Algonquian languages, traditions, social organization, and migration patterns, which unite the Wabanaki across their homelands. This documentary film was recorded in their lands.

We, the *Voices from the Barrens* film family, extend our respect and thanks to the Wabanaki people for sharing their recollections, traditions and way of life.



Long Synopsis:

Voices from the Barrens: Native People, Blueberries and Sovereignty, documents the wild blueberry harvest of the Wabanaki People from the USA and Canada. The film focuses on the Passamaquoddy tribe's challenge to balance blueberry hand raking traditions with the economic realities of the world market, which favor mechanical harvesting. Each August, First People of the Canadian Wabanaki, the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet tribes, cross the US/Canada border into Maine to take part in the tradition of hand raking blueberries with their Passamaquoddy brothers and sisters. This crossing to Maine's blueberry barrens isn't considered "agricultural labor," but is a part of the traditional harvest from the earth.

Short Synopsis:

Each August, First People from the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet tribes cross the US-Canada Border to participate in the traditional wild blueberry harvest, but this way of life is threatened by border politics and 21st century agri-business.

Tagline:

Each August, the Wabanaki Tribes of Maritime Canada and Maine travel to Maine's wild blueberry barrens to harvest. This traditional, hand raked practice is passed down to each generation, but 21st century agri-business and a global food market threaten the tradition's future.



We asked our Wabanaki advisors: “What is significant about the music?”



The Wabanaki people’s reverence for their lands and their spiritual connection to the earth are embedded in this music.

Weaving these Wabanaki traditional songs into the film’s sound design was an essential aspect of sharing their story. With help from Hubert, his brother, Canadian First Nation music producer Brian Francis, Passamaquoddy drummer Aaron Dana, and Donald Soctomah, Historic Preservation Officer for the Passamaquoddy tribe, and the musicians, Lauren Stevens and Rolfe Richter, we recorded these traditional songs, chants, and instrumental interludes. Vicky Mejia-Yepes arranged the music into the final sound design of *Voices from the Barrens*.



“This music is rooted in centuries of life within a culture that has lived in peaceful harmony with all that is created. In particular the ‘Honor Song’ which is part of the film’s opening tableau chants: ‘Come back together, to honor who we are, the Indigenous people we are.’ It honors where our roots stem from, the Earth. It gives thanks to the Creator. The song brings about respect, dignity and deep knowledge of identity for the people.”

Creative Team

Nancy Ghertner

Director

Nancy Ghertner is a visual artist and filmmaker working in experimental and documentary film. Her 2011 feature documentary, *After I Pick the Fruit*, was screened at various film festivals and received a Documentary Achievement award at Southern Appalachian International Film Festival, as well as Honorable Mention at the International Festival for Peace, Inspiration and Equality. The film toured extensively at college, community, church and government organizational screenings. In previous related work, Nancy co-produced and was cinematographer for *330 Miles to Justice*, which documented the 2003 NY Farmworker's March from Seneca Falls to Albany. In 2019 she created a film history of the New York State Fair Labor Practices Act, which passed in 2019, giving farmworkers in New York State labor rights. Nancy is active in human rights organizations in New York State, where she advocates for Immigrant rights, Farmworker justice, and Indigenous Peoples' rights. *Voices from the Barrens* was started from her research into agriculture labor across the International borders.





Vicky Mejia Yepes

Sound Designer, Music Recorder, and Sound Mixer

Vicky Mejia Yepes is an audio artist, educator and musician from Bogota, Colombia. Her career in audio spans ten years as FOH sound engineer, sound mixer, sound designer and re-recording sound mixer. Her work can be heard in *An Ambulance Made of Whiskey*, a short film about coping with depression, which she wrote and directed; the LGBT feature film *Fair Haven*; the short film *Stari Grad*; and the PBS documentary *With INFINITE HOPE: MLK and The Civil Rights Movement* which earned a Mid-south Regional Emmy. She is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Media Arts, Sciences, and Studies at Ithaca College. Vicky is also the lead vocalist of the melodic death metal band Inheritor and released the album *From Dust and Passion*.

Donald Soctomah

Passamaquoddy Historical & Cultural Consultant

Donald Soctomah is an accomplished Native American author, filmmaker, historian and politician. Recently he has been appointed to the advisory council for the National Endowment of Arts in Washington, D.C., Donald serves as the Passamaquoddy Historic Preservation Officer for the Passamaquoddy Tribe in eastern Maine. In this capacity he works with the Maine, United States and Canadian governments on the protection of culturally significant sites, artifacts and knowledge of his people. Books by Donald include: *Remember Me: Tomah Joseph's Gift to Franklin Roosevelt*; *A Visit to Our Ancestors Place*; *Save the Land for the Children: 1900-1850 Passamaquoddy Tribal Life and Times in Maine and New Brunswick*; and *Passamaquoddy at the turn of the Century, 1880-1920*. He is the father of 11 children, grandfather of 20 grandchildren, and has one great grand-child.

Brian J. Francis

Canadian Unit Director; Mi'Kmaq First People's Interpreter

Brian J. Francis, is experienced as a Producer, Director and writer, and has been involved in the development of an Aboriginal Television production called *Eastern Tide*, an anthology series based on the life and times of Atlantic Canada's Mi'kmaq people. In production for three seasons, *Eastern Tide* has proven to be a much-welcomed addition to the line up on the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network. Brian also directed feature documentaries for CBC and the National Film Board of Canada – *Sacred Sundance* and *Circle of Justice*. Brian is also the first Mi'kmaq interpreter in the Canadian House of Commons. He also is an aspiring photographer, painter and poet.

Cat Ashworth

Editor

Cat Ashworth has been creating video artworks, documentaries, and educational programs for over twenty-five years. Recently she directed the *Iroquois Creation Story* (2015), a 17-minute film that combines animation and dance to tell the ancient Haudenosaunee story of how our world came to be. The *Iroquois Creation Story* has won several awards including Best Animation in the 2015 Red Nation Film Festival in Los Angeles, CA. The film is on permanent installation at the Seneca Art and Cultural Center in Victor, NY. Cat Ashworth has an advanced degree in Ethnographic Filmmaking and studied with John Mohawk, a leading scholar, author, and spokesman for the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy. She is a Professor in the School of Film and Animation at Rochester Institute of Technology.



Cinematography & Photography

Drew Ganyer

Cinematographer; Drone Videographer

Drew Ganyer is a Los Angeles based cinematographer who loves everything about cameras and lighting. His work in documentary, commercial and music video filmmaking has brought him around the country and the world, including to Iceland, Argentina, and the Bahamas. Drew's previous clients include Kesha, Amazon, Disney, State Farm, and many others.

Vanessa Ward

Cinematographer

Though Vanessa Ward works mainly as a Camera Assistant in Los Angeles, she has been lucky to hop on documentary projects like *Voices from the Barrens*. She is drawn to the film industry because of a desire to learn from and capture the stories of others. Recently, Vanessa has worked on feature films, commercials and TV series that have aired on FX, CBS, NBC and Netflix.

Rocklyn Warren

Cinematographer; Drone Videographer

Rocklyn Warren (Rocky) is a Director of Photography and owner of Nova Media based in Moncton, New Brunswick. He worked in production for over 30 years in many capacities for community stations in Nova Scotia followed by work in television series for the History Channel, Discovery Channel, and the CBC. Today, Rocky works as Director of Photography and Editor for TV shows, commercials and digital cinema productions.

Zoë Ghertner

Still Photographer

A Los Angeles based fashion and fine art photographer, Zoë Ghertner is known for her strong portrayal of women in a naturalistic style. Zoë's work regularly resides on the pages of Vogue Magazine. She was thrilled to collaborate on *Voices From the Barrens*, a special project for her, to work alongside her mother creating portraits of the Wabanaki for the film.



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