

# A simple voice

Walden filmmaker Caro Thompson brings overlooked history to light with her camera, specializing in giving voices to the forgotten.

By JUSTIN LAVELY

“Being an artist is difficult anywhere,” says filmmaker Caro Thompson. Living in a converted camp in the woods of Walden doesn’t make it any easier, but this Midwest native decided long ago that these mountains and people held sway.

And so do other simple pleasures, like the shy porcupine that hides in the corner of her wood shed. The shed is attached to the house where Caro has spent years researching and editing her films. For awhile, her office was located upstairs, but in the process of tailoring the space to suit her own needs the equipment has been incorporated into the living room, a half-way point to its intended, but as yet unfinished location.

Family camping during her childhood in Illinois left her with a deep appreciation of nature, so the acres of undisturbed woodlands surrounding her home call to her often. “I love winter,” she says sitting a few feet from her toasty wood stove. “Coming from the Midwest, I was taken aback by the mountains when I first saw them, but once they became part of me, I knew I was never going back.”

Her solitude fits with her private nature, and it affords her the advantage of a quiet, peaceful place to work. Though sometimes filmmaking involves lots of travel and people, Caro says there are times when she

needs to be totally engrossed in her work.

It’s hard to argue with the results.

On the heels of winning an Emmy Award and a History Medal from the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, Caro took a moment to reflect on her mission to provide a vehicle for voices of the deserving and often forgotten, as well as the difficulties facing artists.

“[The awards] were definitely life-changing,” she says. “It’s an amazing recognition from your peers.”

Both the Emmy and History Medal were awarded for her film “Champlain: The Lake Between,” the culmination of an ambitious six-year project. The film, which premiered on Vermont Public Television as part of the Champlain quadricentennial, explores the diplomacy and trade between Native nations and Europeans that flourished in the region during the 17th and 18th centuries. It details how Frenchman Samuel de Champlain arrived in what became known as the Champlain Valley in 1609 and changed the course of history.



Walden’s Caro Thompson has spent a lot of time behind the camera. Shown above filming “Champlain: The Lake Between,” the documentary filmmaker enjoys showing viewers a different view of history.

Champlain visited the lake only once, and it already had at least two names – Abenaki and Mohawk - when he arrived. Because he was a mapmaker and became a very influential figure in the formation of what was to become Quebec and Canada, we know it by the way

he labeled it - Lake Champlain.

**Her work**

This film joins a handful of others produced by Caro, including “New England’s Great River: Discovering the Connecticut,” “Barns,” “In Days Gone By,” and “Noble Hearts:

Civil War Vermont.” She operates Broadwing Productions from her home in Walden. She named her company after an unexpected encounter with a broadwing hawk that was perched on a rock near her small pond.

Caro is not fond ...Page 8

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of self-promotion, but she is well spoken, and her education and passion show easily.

When discussing "Champlain: The Lake Between," she explains her effort to study the history of the region with an "open mind." She strived to overcome common preconceptions, picked up while learning history from an "American point of view." Scenes were filmed with Abenaki, Mohawk, Seneca, and other people of Native nations, and she relied heavily on them to make sure her portrayal of their history and culture was correct.

Throughout the film, she refers to people native to this continent using their own terminology, including "bitawbakwa," which is the Abenaki word for today's Lake Champlain and means "the lake between." "Using words in the language of the people I was referring to was important to me," she says. "Instead of 'Mohawk,' I learned to say Kahnienkehake. For the 'Iroquois Confederacy,' the correct term is 'Haudenosaunee.' A people's culture is expressed in the language they speak." Some of the terminology took her weeks to learn. "The challenge opened up pathways in my brain and helped me learn from a new framework." The effort paid off with the cooperation of Native historians and culture bearers, who are wary of filmmakers.

Without embarking on this "journey of diplomacy," as she calls it, the [native nations] would not have opened up to her the way they did.

In some ways, we're still living in a colonial society," says Caro, who believes the incredible cultural losses Native people continue to face are not well understood. "I can go back to Denmark, where my grandparents were from, and hear the language and experience a continuous culture. Some Native nations here have very few – if any – people who still

speak their own language fluently. Children were forced to learn English in Canadian and American government boarding schools."

Her films are treasures for anyone with a deep affection for this land and an interest in its rich history. She admits that as a child, she was not fond of history in school. The constant focus on male historical figures left her disillusioned with the subject. "They weren't role models for my gender," she says. Through networking and what she calls, "an interesting labyrinth" of connections, she has become more and more interested in chronicling the history of common people.

"Sometimes our definition of what's important is the external trappings of power," she says. "What about the people growing our food or running our factories? They deserve to have a voice."

Their voice is on display in the film "In Days Gone By," a recounting of Vermont's rural history through the eyes of the people who lived it. Interviews from across the state chronicle changes in education, farming, transportation, and major events such as the arrival of electricity to rural families. Building relationships with these old time Vermonters was eye-opening, and sometimes getting them to agree to be on camera was challenging.

"I found that if the person I wanted to interview was over 90, I had to sit down with them in person first, before we did anything else," she remembers. "After that, almost all of them agreed to be interviewed."

The film "New England's Great River," traces the history of the Connecticut River along the 410-mile journey from the mouth at Long Island Sound to its beginning as a trickle beneath a beaver dam near the Canadian border. Her "Noble Hearts" film portrays the courage of Vermonters during the Civil War as the men left for



battle and their families stayed behind and kept the home fires burning.

As for Caro's own storytelling voice and production style, she acquired both through a unique step. She stopped going to movies.

"I went to films constantly for a long time, but I realized that to find my own voice I needed to stop taking in other people's work, and then I stopped watching television for about five years as well."

#### Her background

Caro's journey to rural filmmaker is an interesting labyrinth of its own.

Her father was a pastor involved in the Ecumenical movement in Illinois. At the time, protestant priests and ministers of Catholic churches didn't go into each other's sanctuaries. Her father was involved in an effort to bring rabbis, priests, and ministers together to find their commonalities and

learn how they could best serve their communities by working together. Her brother was a political activist.

While attending the University of Rochester in upstate New York, Caro became fascinated with a professor who taught both political science and the history of dance. She did an internship in early modern dance that was videotaped. When she moved to New York City, she was offered a job with the production company that was hired to edit the footage.

"I had no plans to work in television," she says.

Her interest through childhood was music, and in college she began to dance. She tried a career in the performing arts.

"I was a bad guitarist, but a good singer." She said her shyness made it difficult to get people's attention as a performer. As for dancing, she says, her late start made success impossible.

When she looked for work as a camera person in broadcast

television, she found herself in a traditionally male profession. As a videographer/editor on a news crew for the ABC affiliate in Albany, she was one of two females on staff with a slew of males. To this day, she says, if you look at the production credits in television, the technical positions are still predominantly men.

She went on to work for a statewide New York public television public affairs program and began to produce short stories there as well as shoot and edit. But when her personal life drew her to Vermont, she knew that she "had found home."

"There was this combination of the mountains I'd grown to love while living near the Adirondacks and the farm country that I grew up in. It really made me feel grounded in the landscape."

During her early days in Vermont, she was hired as a marketing coordinator for Catamount Arts and produced a behind the scenes video about "High Water," Barnet filmmaker Jay Craven's first narrative film based on a Howard Frank Moshier story. From there, she worked on a host of projects for Vermont Public Television.

Her enthusiasm for filmmaking is unmistakable, but the need for constant fundraising wears on her and has grown increasingly difficult in this economy. She is torn between her passion and a longing for a career that offers a more stable schedule.

"Money is not the only arbiter of the quality of life," she says.

She has just finished a project on the Vermont marble industry and plans to produce a short video on the KoSA Percussion Festival at Castleton State College. After these projects, her future as a documentary filmmaker is uncertain, but she won't rule out the possibility of picking up her camera again.

"Vermont has a great sense of itself, which leaves my plenty of raw material to work with."

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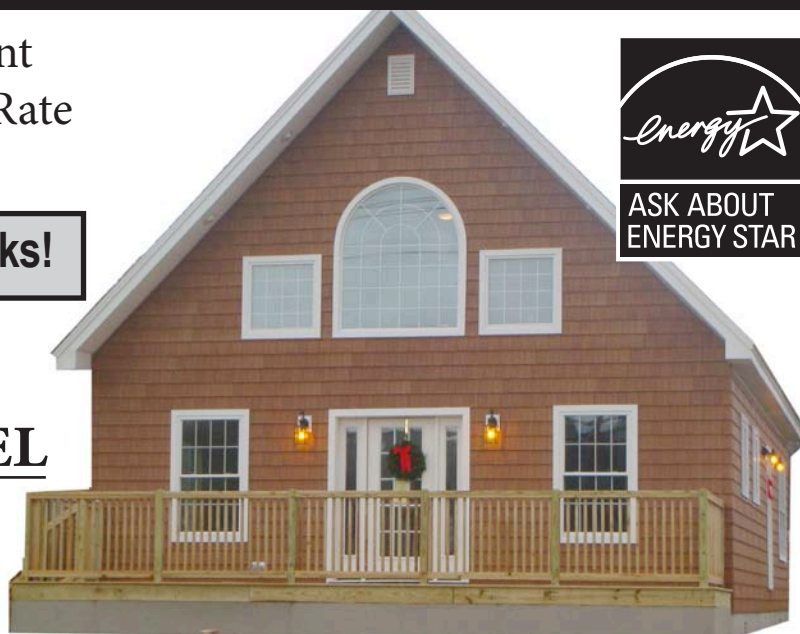
  
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