

seneca falls

history just got personal.

A documentary film by Louise Vance

A Viewing Guide

This guide was developed and written by Louise Vance and Dr. Renya Onasick

Did you know what happened at Seneca Falls?

Where would women be today if Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott didn't take that first bold step to call a public meeting – transforming conversation into action – organizing the *first Woman's Rights Convention* in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848?

The documentary *Seneca Falls* showcases the journey of awakening of nine teenage girls (and a lone boy) who travel to the 150th Anniversary Celebration of this ground-breaking event, taking up the embers of that first step towards equality and igniting the torch of knowledge, passing it on new generations. *Seneca Falls* witnesses the metamorphosis of these young women, revealing their burgeoning perspective on women's rights and documenting their reactions as they learn from history and gain fresh insights into the status of women today. They write and present the rarely taught story of the birth of women's rights by performing their play at Seneca Falls, and are "written into history" themselves, through the media of newspapers, television, and this documentary film.

More than a teenage road-trip, the film documents the steps of funding and staging the young women's play at Seneca Falls and shines a light on the growing awareness of each individual – as she discovers and transforms stories, statues and anecdotes of the women who began the movement into living characters in the play. A tableau from history stirs into action, as each girl shares her unique cultural point of view on today's changing perspectives of women, offering young reflections on image, status and self-worth.

The documentary examines much more than the brush fire started by two passionate women barred entry to an anti-slavery convention in London because of their gender – it fans the flames of that legacy. By personal lessons observed and questions raised, and through the words of leading historians and prominent elected officials the troupe meets along the way, a chorus emerges that speaks eloquently to the remaining needs of the women's movement – and we are prodded to act on the issues that still burn today.

Among the seminal inquiries *Seneca Falls* leaves us with are two essential questions: How can we take up the torch, and where do we go from here?

Choose one, two, three or more topics for your discussion, depending on the time allotted.

A. Your Reaction to *Seneca Falls*

1. What feelings emerged in you while viewing this film?
2. What stands out most for you about the film?
3. Did you relate to the young women, or others, in *Seneca Falls* in any particular way?
4. Was there anything said that you especially remember? Did you find any fact or information surprising?
5. What would your life be like if Mott and Stanton hadn't agreed to place a newspaper ad and call that daring meeting in 1848?
6. Why is it valuable to explore and remember the women of 1848, and honor their contributions to American life today?

B. The Journey

1. What did the young women, the boy, and their directors take back from their journey to Seneca Falls? What shift or transformation did you notice?
2. Describe your own journey while viewing *Seneca Falls*. What resonates with you most? Did history “get personal” for you?
3. How did you feel about how the young women in the documentary turned out, ten years later? Do you see a connection between the experience shown in the film and the path they're on today?
4. Stanton's *Declaration of Sentiments* stated her vision to create a new world – not just have a place at the table men have created. How well did it succeed?
5. Of the 100 signers of the *Declaration of Sentiments*, 32 were men. Do you think we have attained the society Stanton envisioned in the end quote: the “as yet untried experiment of true equality” between women and men?
6. Since the troupe's journey in 1998, are women making progress towards equality, or losing ground? Do you agree with Catherine that there will never be equality?

C. Valuing Women's History

1. The cast was not taught about the women's rights movement in school. Were you?
2. Do you think women's history is sufficiently taught in today's schools? What do the young people in your life know about the women's rights struggle?
3. How are the women of 1848 remembered? Do they come to mind when you think of our nation's forebears?
4. What, of their achievements, is most significant to you personally?
5. What effect do you think *not* learning about the largest social transformation in American history has on society as a whole, and on women and men, as individuals?
6. Recently, three states – Illinois, Florida and Louisiana – passed laws requiring that women's history be taught in public schools. How can we further this trend? Where else can we honor and teach this history?
7. Anthony, Stanton, Sojourner Truth and others campaigned for divorce reform, property rights, the vote for women, equal pay for equal work, educational opportunity and many other rights. Why, then, do you think they are remembered *only* for the campaign to get the vote, when remembered at all?

D. Women's Voices, Women's Lives

1. Seneca Falls marked the first time American women spoke in public. Take a moment to think about a truth you need to speak. What issue do you find yourself struggling with?
2. *Seneca Falls* reveals startling facts about life in 1848. Among the most shocking facts is “the rule of thumb” about legally whipping one's wife. Does knowing this history broaden or reshape your view of domestic abuse?
3. Matilda Gage learned that Iroquois women were stewards of the land. Today, women own *one percent* of the world's landmass. Is there a connection between environmental degradation and the gender imbalance in private ownership, government and business?
4. Federal law banned birth control in 1848, and many women died young after multiple pregnancies. To what extent is “biology” still “destiny” for women?

E. Women Leading Change

1. Does knowing that ordinary women freed half the U.S. from social, civil and political bondage make you feel differently about your *own* power to create positive change?
2. One of the songs in the film is called “Think Big”. Do you think big? Do you think you can accomplish great things? What are the keys?
3. Elizabeth Cady Stanton said, “Start with the outrageous...and eventually it will seem like what’s supposed to happen.” In confronting the challenges women face today, what would be the most daring thing you’d like to see happen?
4. How would you envision making your mark in history? What public arena could you see yourself contributing in – the arts, business, government, education, public service?
5. Have you ever imagined being mayor of your town or president of your country? If no, why not? If yes, how could you make this happen?
6. What personal qualities did the women’s rights pioneers bring to bear when they decided to launch their campaign for equal rights and opportunities?
7. How do you think these women and men were perceived in their own time?
8. Gandhi wrote in his autobiography that he was inspired by Alice Paul and the nonviolent movement that eventually won the vote for U.S. women in 1920. What lessons from the women’s rights movement can we take away and use today?
9. Currently the U.S. ranks 71st among nations in the world in representation of women in its national legislature, with only 18% of Congressional seats held by women. Why don’t more women in America pursue and win public office?
10. What lessons can women in other countries learn from Seneca Falls? What lessons can the U.S. learn from other nations – such as France – which has a parity law requiring one male and one female seat in each district?
11. What barriers remain to electing an American woman President, when more than a dozen other countries have chosen a woman leader?
12. The early women’s movement was a multi-cultural effort. Can women come together across lines of race and culture, as the troupe did by the end of this film, to achieve mutual goals? What would foster trust and mutual respect?

F. What Medium Best Illuminates Your Message?

1. What media and tools best speak to women's rights today? How can we gain recognition – be “written into history” – for what we have accomplished and are accomplishing now?
2. The cast worked with Joan, an actor and theater director, to create their play. What artistic expression of the women's rights struggle might you create that would improve the status of women today? Who might you enlist to join you?
3. Susan B. Anthony started a newspaper, *The Revolution*, in which she wrote about women's rights. Stanton wrote *The Woman's Bible*. Would you add your voice to the public discourse as a guest speaker, in a letter to the editor, as a blogger, by writing an article or a book? Why, or why not?

G. A Question of Image

1. In Western culture, one prevailing opinion that strength in a woman is the antithesis of being feminine. Do you feel this holds true of the young women presented in this film? For yourself?
2. What do you consider feminine -- attractive, acceptable and appropriate?
3. Clothing norms in the U.S. have changed dramatically since the heavy, restrictive, head-to-toe dress worn by women in 1848. Amelia Bloomer shocked the public by introducing pantaloons for women. What is the relationship between women's clothes and their place in society? Have clothing styles become too revealing?
4. Name a powerful woman. Do you consider her attractive? How is intelligence and straightforward speech in women viewed?
5. How were women treated because of their image in your grandmother's generation? And today -- how does your look affect how you are treated? What perception do you hold of yourself – of your own “image”?
6. How are strong women perceived within their communities, both in the U.S. and in developing nations? How do women from other cultures -- or different social and economic strata – see each other? See themselves?

H. Next Steps: Moving Towards Personal or Community-Based Action

1. What does this film (or discussion) make you want to do?
2. What next step do you feel ready to take?
3. What will you need to help you meet that goal? What resources are available?
4. How can you learn more as an individual, or as a community, in order to identify an action that is right for you? What kind of action will it be?
5. Assess the support and challenges you might encounter in taking these next steps: brainstorm different strategies in small groups, build networks, set concrete goals, research available resources, and record progress.
6. Remember the words of the highest ranked public official in U.S. history, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, in her words to the young women in *Seneca Falls*:

“And any time you have a challenge that seems insurmountable, think about what these women did, and if that isn’t any inspiration to us. Compared to what they had to do, anything else is pretty easy. So we have to have that encouragement as we go forward.”

About Joan Mankin and The Play

1. Why do you think Joan, an accomplished actor and theater director, chose to guide middle school girls to create this play? Why do you think she chose to present the play at Seneca Falls? What do you think she hoped to accomplish? What do you feel she did accomplish?
2. What did you notice about the audience response to the play? How do you think the play helped illuminate the past, present and future of women’s rights?
3. Where does the theater group in *Seneca Falls* succeed in the various stages of mounting their production? (i.e. raising money, getting recognized, getting media attention, promoting the project, enlisting help). What does their model of “starting small and growing so big” teach us?
4. Would you like to stage the play featured in *Seneca Falls*? “It’s About Time” is available to stage in your school or organization. Contact Joan Mankin at: queeniemoon@sbcglobal.net.

About Louise Vance, The Filmmaker

1. Why do you think Louise Vance, an independent filmmaker, took on the task of producing and directing this film without financial backing from a network or studio?
2. When watching, could you sense that a woman director made this film? What did you notice about the filmmaker's point of view and storytelling style?
3. Many documentary films are "remedial" in nature, serving to shine light on present day human rights abuses around the globe. Do you think *Seneca Falls* is remedial in its own way, or is it more of a proactive film? Is there a place for both kinds of documentaries?
4. Is there something you can do to assist the filmmaker with getting *Seneca Falls* shown, or placed in libraries, organizations or museums in your community? To order a DVD, set up a screening, contribute to the outreach campaign, and learn more about the director and the film, please visit: www.senecafallsfilm.org.
5. Would you like to continue this discussion online with women, teenage girls and their allies from around the world? *Beyond Seneca Falls* is launching soon! Please visit www.beyondsenecafalls.com. And visit our Facebook page, Seneca Falls Film.

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Renya Onasick earned her doctorate from Harvard University's Graduate School of Design after co-directing Video Culture International in Toronto for five years. She is the mother of a gifted ten-year-old daughter, for whom she wishes empowerment and endless opportunities to grow and contribute, as her mother before her. Renya is deeply involved in her daughter's education, volunteering in schools to broaden cultural initiatives and awareness through the presentation of arts and media enrichment programs.

*Louise Vance is a Peabody and Columbia-Dupont Award-winning director who has been telling stories on television and film for more than 25 years. An original CNN producer with an English teaching degree from the University at Albany, she has created five films that serve women and girls, and dozens of others that illuminate global issues, community initiatives, health policy, and environmental concerns. Louise has dedicated a dozen years to the production and outreach campaign of **Seneca Falls**, based on her root belief that "knowing your history gives you courage."*