

## #6 – Iron Men

November 13, 2005

Iron men

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HYANNIS - High atop the steel skeleton that is the Cape Cod Hospital annex there stand two flags: Old Glory and that of the Mohawk nation.

Micmac Indian Gerry Martin takes it all in atop the six-story Cape Cod Hospital expansion. Of the 24 men building the frame of the patient tower, 13 are Mohawk and two are Micmac Indians.  
(Staff photo by Steve Heaslip)

From a red background bursts a yellow star surrounding the face of a mighty Mohawk.

This flag came from the grandfather of Terry Diabo, 43, an iron and steelworker framing the \$38 million, 6-story hospital expansion.

Of the two dozen "men of steel" crafting the frame of this future patient tower, 13 are Mohawk and two are Micmac Indians.

"The white people are usually outnumbered," said Gerry Martin, 34, a Micmac Indian from the Restigouche reservation in Quebec, Canada.

A lot of construction sites through the ages have had similar demographics.

"It's always been that way," said project manager Ward Jaros, of the Lexington-based construction firm Linbeck.

Legend says it's because Mohawk Indians are more agile and less afraid of heights, but that's not necessarily true.

"(Heights) bother me," said ironworker Ryan Montour, 33, who is from Kahnawá:ke, one of seven communities of the Mohawk Nation south of Montreal on the St. Lawrence River. "I'm scared. But you have to do it. You have to walk it."

By walking it, he means 4-inch beams spanning great heights. The tallest building he's worked was more than 50 stories, or about 500 feet above the ground. But he had harnesses, safety nets and other gear to keep him steady.

His grandparents and prior generations weren't so equipped. Montour and Diabo say their elders make fun of them and call their work wimpy compared with the old days.

Back then, four men would work a riveting crew, stationed high in the sky, only a rope connecting them to the building or bridge. One would heat a rivet and hurl it with pincers to another, who would catch it in a megaphone-like device.

A third person would hold beams together, and the rivet would be deposited while a fourth pounded the rivet in to secure the iron or steel, said Kevin Baker, who wrote an article about Mohawk iron workers for the book "American Greats."

Mohawk Indians now live in settlements throughout New York State and Southeastern Canada and include the Ganienkeh and Kanatsiohareke in Northeast New York, the Kwasasne/St.Regis along the Ontario-New York

State border, the Kanesatake/Oka and Kahnawake/Caughnawaga in southwest Quebec and the Tyendinaga and Wahta/Gibson in southern Ontario.

They took up the iron trade in the 1880s when they were hired as unskilled laborers to work on a bridge across the St. Lawrence River, according to the Smithsonian Institution, which has a traveling exhibition about "walking iron."

Mohawks became known for their gift of walking high steel, and a legend was born.

"They don't have any genetic ability to climb tall heights," Baker said. "They just seemed to not have feared it."

"It was quite a big thing on the Mohawk reservation," Baker added. "It was a great way and an interesting way to make money."

And so through the years and generations, Mohawks have visited cities, constructing bridges, towers, stadiums and roadways. "We move everywhere there is work," said Montour, who like other crew members usually drives home on weekends.

It's called "booming out," this migration of Mohawks.

The skyline of New York was one benefactor. But the work wasn't just confined to the East Coast. A group even added their touch to the Bay Bridge in San Francisco.

"Every major building - there's been a Mohawk on the roof," Montour said.

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(Published: November 13, 2005)

<http://www.capecodonline.com/cctimes/ironmen13.htm>

For more information on Mohawk Iron workers see:

Booming Out - Smithsonian Photo exhibit

[http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/booming\\_out/indexfla.htm](http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/booming_out/indexfla.htm)

News from Indian Country

<http://www.indiancountrynews.com/ironworkers.cfm>

Aboriginal Ironworkers

[http://206.191.7.176/dev/iron/tradition/index\\_e.asp](http://206.191.7.176/dev/iron/tradition/index_e.asp)

Mohawk Iron workers witness Sept. 11 planes

<http://www.indiancountry.com/content.cfm?id=252>

Audio: Walking High Steel: Mohawk Ironworkers at the Twin Towers - requires free registration-

<http://www.prx.org/pieces/2213>

An Old Spirit Rises from the Ashes

<http://www.firstnationsdrum.com/Aug02/HisMohawk.htm>