EDWARD SHERIFF CURTIS: 1868-1952

The Shadow Catcher

RIC HAYNES

Edward S. Curtis spent thirty-seven years in the field photographing, documenting, and reconstructing life on the North American continent west of the Mississippi as he believed it must have been before the arrival of the white man. He was a self-taught ethnographer, a professional photographer, student of comparative relations, and a rugged outdoorsman who could endure the harshest environment, both physically and mentally.

Curtis' purpose was not merely to obtain photographs of Indians of the many tribes as they went about their daily pursuits but to emphasize the traditional aspects of Native American life for his own and future generations. His hope was that each turn of the page and each subsequent picture would inspire appreciation of that way of life. What resulted from this dedicated labor was a magnum opus of twenty volumes of text accompanied by 1500 photogravure prints, 20 complete portfolios totaling 722 plates and a special de luxe edition. In 1910, the New York Herald wrote that this was "the most gigantic undertaking in the making of books since the King James edition of the Bible."

Curtis was born near Whitewater, Wisconsin in 1868. His father was a circuit preacher and often took young Edward with him on his long treks through the Wisconsin and Minnesota wilderness. It was this early exposure to religion and unspoiled Nature that was the catalyst for his life work. He made his first camera out of boxes and a stereopticon lens which his father brought back from his service in the Civil War.

During the 1890's Curtis worked for a photographic gallery in St. Paul, experimenting with the fundamentals of his new craft. He tried to operate a studio of his own but could not find enough clients to support it. When that failed, he worked for a few years as a foreman of track crews of the Soo Line Railroad in Minnesota. Meanwhile, his father became ill and it was decided that the family would move to the warmer climate of the southern end of Puget Sound in Washington Territory. In 1892, Curtis married a neighbor, Clara Phillips, and in the same year went into partnership with Henry Guitel in Seattle. Their business was a reprinter of photographs, specializing in family portraits. At this time Curtis offered for sale his early sepia prints of Indian subjects.

As a result of the move to Washington Territory and his consequent exposure to the oppressed Native American people there, he became so aware of their dilemma that he chose them as his most preferred photographic subjects. He paid "Princess" Angelina, the daughter of Chief Sealth (whose name was later bastardized into Seattle), to pose for a dollar a picture. Curtis recalled, "This seemed to please her greatly and she indicated that she preferred to spend her time having pictures taken to digging clams. Curtis was also an avid mountaineer and he photographed many commercial views of Mt. Rainier. He was such an accomplished climber that he led many groups to the summit—on one occasion 108 Kowoween. During one climb he stumbled upon and led to safety a group of important "Scientifics" (Curtis' word) which included Dr. C. Hart Merriam, Chief of the U.S. Biological Survey, Gifford Pinchot, Chief of the U.S. Forestry Department, and George Bird Grinnell who was, besides being the editor of Forest and Stream magazine, the author of Blackfoot Lodge Tales and other volumes on the American Indians. Their political and national influence were a great asset to Curtis and later it was their encourage- ment that persuaded him to pursue his vast project. They engaged him to become one of the two official photographers accompanying an expedition to Bering Sea in 1899 which they were sponsoring. The naturalist John Muir and ethnologist John Burroughs also accompanied this expedition. Curtis made his first serious photographic studies of Indian life at this time.

At the invitation of Grinnell, Curtis spent a summer season in northern Montana among the Blackfoot. He was awed by the natural serenity which confronted him there. From all appearances, there was little contamination from contact with white men. Clearly Curtis realized that this image of man in harmony with Nature was rapidly deteriorating amongst the Indian race and he com- mitted himself to record the evidence of man’s harmonious place in a vanishing sacred unity of Man and Nature which he saw exemplified there, and with which modern civilization had lost touch. Curtis regarded himself as a recorder of a "Vanishing Race." He did not think of himself as an artist, and denied any reference to his work as Art.

Curtis financed his own project of documentation for a period of nine years beginning in 1897. Three of his first photographs, "The Clam Digger," "Homeward," and "The Messel Gatherers," won the grand prize in the National Photographic Exhibition held in Washington, D.C. in 1908. These photographs traveled internationally, winning acclaim and prizes. Theodore Roosevelt was impressed by an early exhibit of Curtis' work in 1905 at the Washington Club, Washington, D.C. and felt that the project of photographing eighty North American Indian tribes must be properly financed and supported. Roosevelt introduced Curtiso to the magnate J. P. Morgan who, after some hesitation, decided to see the photographs and texts put into a more permanent form. Furthermore, he instituted "The North American Indian, Inc." which handled subscriptions, invested funds, and dispensed financial support to Curtis. After Morgan’s death, the Morgan Estate financed over half of the project.

Theodore Roosevelt wrote the introduction to the first volume published in 1907. The editor of the text was the noted ethnologist Frederick Webb Hodge from the Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution.

The material was collected and photographed systematically. Curtis had a small staff that researched each tribal area west of the Mississippi. This was succeeded by photographic sessions covering high points brought out by the research of W. E. Meyers, a former reporter of the Seattle Star, was Curtis' right-hand man. Meyers was an English literate, a major in college and had an unusual sensitivity to phonetics and language. He was able to record in shorthand the native dialogue at an amazing speed.

The photographic illustrations were printed as finely pressed photogravure prints. They had been selected from 40,000 photographs taken between 1897 and 1930. The cameras Curtis used in the field were a 14x17 inch glass plate view camera, a 9.25x6.5 inch dry plate Reversible Black Pumo view camera with a shutter speed of 1/25 of a second, and a 6x8 inch sheet film reflex model. There were no exposure meters and no filters. Each volume took one to two years to produce. He tried to publish and assemble the volumes at production line speed by sending completed parts of the volumes to
publisher, The University Press, in Cambridge, Mass. The pictures were hand printed from copperplates by John Andrew and Son, Boston. Five hundred copies were printed, but only 272 were bound. The cost of a subscription to the volumes and the portfolio was $3,000.

In 1911, financial difficulties forced Curtis to go on the road with a lantern slide lecture tour. It was hoped that this tour would stimulate new subscriptions. The illustrated lecture series was narrated by Curtis and accompanied by interludes of transcribed Indian music played by a theatrical orchestra. To Curtis himself this was an ordeal. Nevertheless, he staged a memorable Indian opera backed by a motion picture at Carnegie Hall in New York City in November, 1911. Dr. G. B. Gordon, the director of the University Museum, upon seeing that presentation immediately made arrangements for the illustrated lecture to be given at this Museum.

Curtis also produced a movie entitled “In the Land of the Headhunters” in 1914. It is a love story acted by Kwakiutl actors. The movie at the time was a financial failure, but it has recently been restored, re-edited, and re-titled “In the Land of the War Canoes” by George Quimby at the University of Washington.

During the entire period of collecting the material for The North American Indian, Curtis became acutely aware of an American Native conception of life which denied the separation of the material and the spiritual and viewed opposites in a single continuum, and that this concept was in danger of extinction. Consequently, he was determined to record faithfully the full spectrum of Native American life. With the help of an interpreter and Meyers, he held interviews with elders, shamans, warriors, young men and women who related their tribal lore to him. Although Curtis was an amateur and lacked the scholarly training, insight, and erudition of a trained anthropologist, the deficiency was partially compensated for by first-hand narration. At one point while among the Kiowa, Curtis was told by an interpreter after endless hours spent attempting to trace origin myths, that what he was looking for was not there.

Curtis often arrived too late to record vital information. Collectors had gotten there before him. Sacred paraphernalia had already been sold to them. One of these collectors was George G. Heeye who was assiduously assembling material for his new Museum of the American Indian in New York City.

On the other hand, Curtis was sometimes able to obtain in a day enough information which other men had spent lifetimes in a futile effort to gather. While there were times when the Indians’ distrust of all whites was an obstacle which had to be overcome, often Curtis’ presence would be tolerated or ignored during religious procedures, so that he could observe these mysteries without prohibition. Curtis even claimed to have actually participated in the Hopi Snake Society’s rituals, carrying the customary snake in his mouth, and to have passed through the arduous endurance tests required for tribal acceptance. Thus he was able to win the Indians’ confidence and was allowed to capture photographically these sacred tableaux, using either real participants or hired models. He paid his models with silver dollars, sides of beef, and autographed photographs.

While his purpose was undoubtedly objective documentation, Curtis did employ a “painterly effect” in his work by retouching [his own word] the photographs. This he did by instructions to his engravers in Boston.

Despite various tribulations and tests of human endurance which delayed the work by years, the printing of this record of a vanishing culture was completed in 1930. Unfortunately, the prevailing economic depression doomed it to obscurity because of its cost and size.
CROW
#112. APSAROKE WAR-CHEF. (The three fox-tails hanging from the coup-stick show the subject—Medicine Crow, to be the possessor of three first coups, that is, in three encounters he was the first to strike one of the enemy’s force. The necklace consists of beads, and the large ornaments at the shoulders are abalone shells.)

CROW
#136. AUTUMN—APSAROKE. (An autumn scene in the valley of the Little Big Horn.)

ARIKARA
#157. ARIKARA—MEDICINE FRATERNITY. (In this group are shown the principal participants in the re-enactment of the Arikara medicine ceremony, which was given for the author’s observation and study in July, 1908.)

BLACKFOOT
#205. BRINGING THE SWEAT-LODGE WILLOWS—PIEGAN. (Young horsemen are coming toward the Sun-dance encampment with willows for the faster’s sweat-lodge.)
CHEYENNE

#218. WAITING IN THE FOREST—CHEYENNE. (At dusk in the neighborhood of the large encampments young men, closely wrapped in non-comittal blankets or white cotton sheets, may be seen gliding about the tips or standing motionless in the shadow of the trees, each one alert for the opportunity to steal a meeting with his sweetheart.)

CAYUSE

#273. HOLIDAY TRAPPINGS—CAYUSE. (Wealthy members of the tribes living on the Umatilla reservation in Oregon spare no expense in bedecking themselves and their mounts on gala occasions. The articles of adornment are usually of deerskin, or of commercial blankets on which designs are worked in beads.)

QUINAULT

#304. QUINAULT FEMALE.

SALISH

#300. A CHIEF'S DAUGHTER—SKOKOMISH. (Pride of birth played a prominent role in the life of the Pacific Coast Indians. Society was rigidly divided into nobility, common people, and slaves taken in war. No woman of common birth could afford the luxury of the fur robe worn by the subject of this picture.)
KWAKIUTL
#355. DANCING TO RESTORE AN ECLIPSED MOON—QAGYUL. (It is thought that an eclipse is the result of an attempt of some creature in the sky to swallow the luminaries. In order to compel the monster to disgorge it, the people dance round a smouldering fire of old clothing and hair; the stench of which, rising to his nostrils, is expected to cause him to sneeze and disgorge the moon.)

NOOTKA
#376. CEREMONIAL BATHING. (The subject . . . is a female shaman of the Cayequot tribe. The ceremonial washing of shamans is much like that of whalers and other hunters consisting mainly of sitting or standing in water and rubbing the body with hemlock sprigs in order to remove all earthly taint, which would offend the supernatural powers.)

HUPA
#465. FISHING PLATFORM ON TRINITY RIVER—HUPA. (As the run of spring salmon occurs at a season when the river is too high for the construction of a weir, they are taken in dip-nets from platforms erected above favorable eddies.)

POMO
#467. FISHING CAMP—LAKE POMO. (Large quantities of a species locally called Black-fish are still taken annually by the Lake Pomo. The fish are split down the back, and after the removal of backbone, head, and entrails, are hung on pole racks to dry in the sun for about two weeks, after which they are thoroughly cured in smoke-houses. Tule huts are not now seen, the one here shown having been built especially for the occasion.)
-CAHUILLA
#533. ANDRÉS CAÑON. [Near Andrés Cañon, south of Palm Springs, was Pataik, the winter residence of a branch of the Palm Cañon Cahuilla.]

NAMBÉ PUEBLO (Tewa)
#599. AN OFFERING AT THE WATERFALL—NAMBE. (Feather offerings are deposited in numerous shrines, buried in the earth near the pueblo, and placed in springs, streams, and lakes, for the purpose of winning the favor of the cloud-gods.)

BLACKFOOT
#647. MAKÖ YÉPUX [“WOLF-CHILD”]—BLOOD.
CHEYENNE
#669. WOISTA—CHEYENNE WOMAN. (Remarkable strength of character is depicted in the features of this woman, and indeed in those of all the Cheyenne. Their former life was such that only the fittest could survive.)

NUNIVAK
#688. NUNIVAK CHILDREN. (Children and adults alike of the Nunivak group are healthy, as a rule, and exceptionally happy because they have been little affected by contact with civilization.)