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**Photographer Brothers  
Edward and Asahel Curtis**

Wenatchee Valley  
**M·U·S·E·U·M**  
& Cultural Center

*"Inspiring dynamic connections to the unique heritage of the Wenatchee Valley"*

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**From the Curator of Exhibits**

Kasey Koski

I received a phone call in 2015 asking if the Wenatchee Valley Museum would be interested in an exhibit of the work of Edward Curtis. My intuitive response was "yes!" While my gut said yes, my mind asked, "Who is Edward Curtis?" A few seconds of keyboard research brought me up to speed as beautiful images of Curtis' photography filled my screen. Many of them were familiar.



I immediately picked up a copy of Timothy Egan's *Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher* and found Curtis to be an incredibly interesting character. His passion and vision were admirable; however, his motivation may have been a little misguided. In his perception, Native Americans were a "vanishing race." Native populations had declined through widespread disease introduced by European contact and violent deaths through skirmishes with settlers and the U.S. Army in disputes over land. But the Native Americans would not vanish into the sunset as he predicted. Curtis' work is cited as the impetus for many of the misconceptions that live on across the globe today. His subjects were not nameless savages or braves or squaws, but people with names that were part of sophisticated societies with their own values who had lived on the American continent since time immemorial.

In today's world, we are fortunate to still have the rich tapestry of Native American cultures present in our society. They lead the way in many forms of environmental activism through their rich connection to Mother Earth. They draw strength from their connection and provide teachings for those of us of European descent to learn from, despite their history of unfair treatment at our hands.

Our exhibit honoring the 150th birthday of Edward Curtis, opening Oct. 5, gives us the opportunity to examine his legacy, the positive and negative impact of his undeniably beautiful work, and ponder: Can we live together with our native brothers and sisters in a peaceful, collaborative way to benefit all of humanity?

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*Cover: In British Columbia c. 1914, Edward Curtis photographed Kwakiutl dancers in masks and costumes during a winter ceremony.*

**Edward Curtis Photos Reveal Philosophical Agenda**

by Chris Rader

Edward Curtis devoted his life to a project that some of his contemporaries considered an expensive folly: documenting the lifestyles of more than 80 Native American groups through photographs, audio recordings and anthropological text. He pursued his goal for 30 years despite bankruptcy, divorce and ill health. Regardless of the high toll to Curtis' personal life, the end result – a 20-volume book collection titled *The North American Indian* – is a priceless contribution to history.



*Edward Curtis adopted a Van Dyke-style beard in the 1890s and kept it the rest of his life.*

Edward Sheriff Curtis was born February 16, 1868 in Whitewater, Wisconsin. He was the second of four children born to Civil War veteran and itinerant preacher Johnson Curtis and his wife Ellen. Johnson, debilitated by his war experiences, was never able to support his family and they lived in poverty, sometimes subsisting on potatoes for weeks at a time. After his older brother Raphael left home, Ed quit school at age 12 and became the family caretaker when his father was too ill to work or find food.

In his early teen years Ed became interested in photography, building a camera from a stereopticon lens his father had brought back from the Civil War plus \$1.25 for the remaining parts.<sup>1</sup> He moved to St. Paul, Minn. at 17 and apprenticed as a photographer, soon becoming very proficient.

In 1887 Ed accompanied his father to Puget Sound in search of a climate that might restore Johnson's health. They established a homestead near Port Orchard, across the water from Seattle. Ed cut down trees and built a cabin for the family, the rest of whom arrived the following year. Rev. Curtis died shortly after the family relocated. Ed and his younger brother Asahel (see page 10) fished for salmon, picked berries and dug shellfish; Ed did odd jobs for cash to keep the family alive.

While logging, Ed took a bad fall and seriously injured his spine. He was confined to his bed for nearly a year. Timothy Egan, in his award-winning biography *Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher*, describes how Edward Curtis used the time to hone skills that would help his photographic career.

It was awful not being able to get around, watching his mother put together a meal of boiled potatoes and bacon grease. Out the window, though, was a world that gave flight to his spirit. He became a close observer: how the color of the land would change subtly in shifting light, the

moments in midmorning when the fog lifted, or breaks in the afternoon between rain showers, when he could see the spectrum of the rainbow in a single drop held by a rhododendron leaf.<sup>2</sup>

A 16-year-old neighbor girl, Clara Phillips, came by often to help nurse Ed back to health. When he recovered, he moved to Seattle and found work as a photographer. Clara joined him there, and they married in 1892. By 1895 Ed's photography business, Curtis and Guptill: Photographers and Photoengravers, was thriving. He and Clara bought a large house on Eighth Avenue and invited mother Ellen, siblings Eva and Asahel, an aunt and two other relatives to live with them. Asahel became an apprentice in the studio.

There was plenty of photo work in the bustling city of Seattle: portraits of prominent citizens, scenes of construction, awe-inspiring landscapes. But Edward Curtis found himself fascinated by the Duwamish and other native peoples who were being pushed out of their homeland. He found opportunities to photograph them along the shores of Puget Sound gathering shellfish, weaving baskets, cooking, playing with their children. On the action shots he would tell them, "Don't pose! I want people to see you as you are."



*This photo of Princess Angeline, daughter of Chief Seattle, was Curtis' first Indian portrait.*

This desire to document Indians in their traditional habitat became Curtis' lifelong obsession.

### *Mountaineering trip leads to useful contact*

Both Edward and Asahel Curtis fell in love with the Cascade Mountains, so different from the Midwestern landscape of their childhood. Both became skillful climbers and took many photographs of mountain scenes most people would never encounter. On one 1898 solo climb of Mount Rainier, Edward was looking across at the Nisqually Glacier as night began to fall when he heard a call of distress. Six middle-aged men were cold, wet and lost. Curtis climbed down to them, then led them upward to his refuge at Camp Muir where he had built a rock shelter and stockpiled firewood. He got a fire going and the men soon cheered up.

One of them was George Bird Grinnell, founder of the Audubon Society and considered the world's foremost expert on Plains Indians. Grinnell was fascinated by Curtis' descriptions of photographing Pacific coastal tribes. After the men safely returned to Seattle from the mountain, Grinnell visited Curtis in his (now one-man) studio and was impressed by not only the photographs but also his new friend's amateur anthropological records. Curtis had been collecting bits of tribal mythology and travel narratives, writing up summaries of these scraps of the Indian's inner world.<sup>3</sup> A conservationist and Indian lover himself, Grinnell invited Curtis to be the photographer on two significant expeditions: the Harriman Alaskan scientific expedition in 1899 and a quest in 1900 to witness the Sun Dance ceremony in Montana.

Grinnell, who was known as the Father of the Blackfoot, had spent twenty seasons in the field with the Blackfoot and Piegan and had established a position of knowledge and trust that opened new doors for Curtis that fateful summer. It was this access to closely held native rituals and spiritual beliefs that so profoundly changed his life. Equally important were the personal interactions between Curtis and several native individuals.

Conversations with Grinnell

*Curtis earned the trust of Navajo elders and was allowed to photograph Yebichai dancers. The man at left is clothed in evergreen boughs.*



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*George Bird Grinnell*

photography?"<sup>4</sup>

Standing on a cliff with Grinnell and looking down at hundreds of Piegans at the Sun Dance ceremony, Curtis felt a reverence for the depth of feeling the Indians had in worshipping the sun. However, his appreciation for the longstanding traditional dance contradicted official American government policy. The Indian Religious Crimes Code of 1883 prevented indigenous people from practicing any form of religion deemed "pagan": certain dances, feasts, chants led by medicine men, even goods-sharing potlatches. Indians still held these ceremonies, but "underground," away from white men's eyes. Curtis was honored to be accepted by the Piegans and permitted to watch the Sun Dance.

Grinnell cautioned Curtis not to come on too strong,

had led Curtis to formulate what became his "Big Idea." As Grinnell later described it, "Here was a great country in which still live hundreds of tribes and remnants of tribes, some of which still retain many of their primitive customs and their ancient beliefs. Would it not be a worthy work, from the points of view of art and science and history, to represent them all by

*Glacier National Park*

but to listen and be humble. The younger man took this advice – and followed it for the next 30 years in his dealings with Native Americans. He later wrote in his memoir, *As It Was*: "To ask the Piegan ... any direct question bearing on the subject of religion yields scant light. It is necessary to learn, rather, from the everyday life of the people."<sup>5</sup> Over time he observed Piegans fasting for three days before praying to the sun, Sioux warriors eating the hearts of grizzly bear, Hopi priests handling rattlesnakes, and other religious practices with which he had no quarrel. In fact, Curtis felt more affinity for native religious traditions than for the evangelical Christianity his father had preached.

Though Chief White Calf would not allow Curtis to photograph the five-day Sun Dance ceremony, he let him do portraits of willing tribal members (for a price) and shots of the encampment, lodges, horses and campfires. These likenesses, and the immersion into Piegan life, convinced Curtis that he should try to capture the essence of other tribal communities as they were – before their traditional way of life disappeared forever.

### *Meets Teddy Roosevelt*

Curtis returned home after the Sun Dance but only stayed a few weeks. He was eager to travel to the Southwest to meet and photograph the Navajo, Apache and Hopi peoples. His wife and three young children were not happy to see him leave again, but Ed would not be deterred. He made several trips to Arizona and New Mexico during the next few years, spending much more time with Indians than with his family.

These self-financed photographic pilgrimages were taking a toll on the Curtis studio. Even under Clara's thrifty management, the business was barely squeaking by on portrait sales (whenever Ed was home long enough to recruit wealthy Seattle subjects). He tried to interest some of these men in financing his "Big Idea," but it was not until he met President Theodore Roosevelt in 1904 that he found a kindred spirit.

Impressed by Curtis' prize-winning portrait of a young Seattle girl, the president invited him to the White House to photograph the Roosevelt children. While there, Curtis showed his Indian portfolio to T.R. and shared his dream of documenting the tribal culture of all American tribes.



*A young Assiniboine horseman is pictured outside a decorated tipi.*

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Roosevelt called the project "a bully idea," and gave him a written letter of endorsement (though no cash).

Buoyed by the president's and Grinnell's public support, Curtis continued to approach potential sponsors in between trips to photograph Southwest tribes. Finally in 1906 he hit pay dirt with J.P. Morgan. The banker-financier behind General Electric and U.S. Steel, Morgan had less interest in Native Americans than in profiting from Curtis' project. He agreed to underwrite what Curtis now envisioned as a 20-book series, pledging an initial \$75,000 over five years, with the condition that the photographer would take no personal salary. Curtis was ecstatic.

### *Volume I is published*

With Morgan's money, Ed was able to afford travel expenses and hire a team to help with anthropological research, text writing and editing. Former newspaperman William Myers, field manager Bill Phillips, Indian scholar Frederick Webb Hodge, and various cooks and translators shared the project's vision and made Curtis' life easier. Even Ed's 12-year-old son, Hal, rode horseback alongside his father to soak up the culture of the Apache after they arrived in Arizona by train. (Later collaborators included Alexander Upshaw, a full-blooded Crow writer and interpreter.)

Curtis managed to convince a medicine man from the Apache reservation, Goshonné, to share tribal religious secrets. For a fee, the medicine man allowed Curtis to take pictures of a deerskin scroll containing symbols of the Apache creation myth. Ed made wax cylinder audio recordings of Goshonné's religious descriptions

*Wikipedia, public domain, Wellcome Collection, London*

*Postcard, Azusa Publishing Co.*



In 1906 Curtis photographed Nampeyo, "Serpent that Has No Tooth," one of the best-known Hopi potters.

and prayers, and was permitted to take photos of individuals.

The resulting book, the first volume in *The North American Indian* series, was published in 1907. Theodore Roosevelt wrote the foreword and J.P. Morgan was credited as the field research patron. It was a large book of thick, fancy paper filled with photographic plates and pithy text describing the Apache, Jicarilla and Navajo lifestyle. In the introduction, Curtis presented his plan to tell the broad story of Indian life.

It is thus near to Nature that much of the life of the Indian still is; hence its story, rather than being replete with statistics of commercial conquest, is a record of the Indian's relations with and his dependence on the phenomena of the universe – the trees and shrubs, the sun and stars, the lightning and rain – for these to him are animate creatures. Even more than that, they are deified.

Curtis did not sell the book separately but sought subscribers for the entire 20-volume set, which he hoped would be completed within seven years. The price was high, though, and only a few people signed on. The

author-photographer had hoped that subscriptions would pay for his salary and Seattle studio expenses, but this was not to be.

Undaunted, he returned to the Southwest to gather images and information for Volume II. It was published in 1908 and covered 10 smaller tribes including the Yuma. For the next 22 years Curtis alternated field trips with studio work. He brought Clara and the children on a few trips, but his obsession with the book series (which he referred to as his mistress) alienated his wife. She filed for divorce in 1910. Meanwhile, Ed's mother Ellen and sister Eva had moved in with brother Asahel and had little to do with Ed (see following story).

### *Documents 80 tribes*

Curtis' "Big Idea" took him all over the western United States. He documented the Sioux, Crow, Mandan, Piegan, Nez Perce, Haida, Hopi, Shoshone, Comanche and other tribes – 80 in all. Ever an optimist and never a complainer, he endured discomfort and boredom as well as antagonism as he sought to befriend the Indians. His magnificent portraits and genre photos of people hunting, fishing, picking berries, cooking, carrying firewood and water, weaving, beading, making pottery, building homes, and riding horses through beautiful landscapes convinced him of the worth and dignity of native peoples. Curtis' view was not that of all Americans, however.

In the 1870s General William Tecumseh Sherman had declared that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian." By 1900 missionaries and Indian agents were saying that "the only good Indian is a Christian farmer in overalls." The Indians' nomadic life and "pagan" ceremonies and beliefs

Edward Curtis took this photo of Nez Perce Chief Joseph in 1903, shortly before the chief's death.



were to be stamped out at all costs... In the General Introduction (of his 20-book series) Curtis noted that his work "represents the result of a personal study of a people who are rapidly losing the traces of the aboriginal character and who are destined ultimately to become assimilated with the 'superior race.'"<sup>6</sup>

Curtis railed against U.S. governmental policies such as internment Indian children in white schools meant to "kill the Indian and save the man," a practice that Curtis considered "educational whitewash."<sup>7</sup> He was particularly incensed at the government's treatment of the peaceful Nez Perce. In Volume VIII he described them as "a mentally superior people (who) were friendly from their first contact with white men. Their history since 1855, and particularly in the war of 1877, tells how they were repaid for their loyalty to the white brother."

On one of his trips to Arizona to observe and photograph the Hopi for what would become Volume XII, Curtis brought along a motion picture camera. He shot part of the Snake Dance. After editing, he used this film as part of a multimedia presentation to prospective donors. Then, in 1914, he filmed the Kwakiutl of British Columbia with their totem poles, ornamental war canoes, ritual ceremonies using elaborate animal costumes and carved masks, and reputed history as head hunters and cannibals. He actually wrote a story line and hired native actors, setting out to produce the world's first feature-length documentary film. The result was "In the Land of the Head Hunters." It opened in New York and Seattle to rave reviews by critics – but was caught up in litigation (Curtis had gone over budget and owed the movie distributor) and disappeared from public view.

Despite his miserable financial condition, Curtis was determined to finish his 20-volume project. In the late 1920s his daughter Beth and her husband, photographer Manford Magnuson, joined the business and ran a branch Curtis studio in California (with ex-wife Clara running the Seattle shop). Beth accompanied her father to Alaska in 1927 to document several Eskimo tribes for the final book in the series. They were disappointed to encounter a trash-filled village of about 300 Yup'ik who reeked of rotten seal meat and sea detritus.

"The Hooper Bay natives have the reputation of being the filthiest human beings on the globe," Curtis wrote. "I have not seen all the world's dirty natives but I can say that no



Curtis captured a dramatic sky in this 1898 photograph of Salish men on Puget Sound landing a canoe.

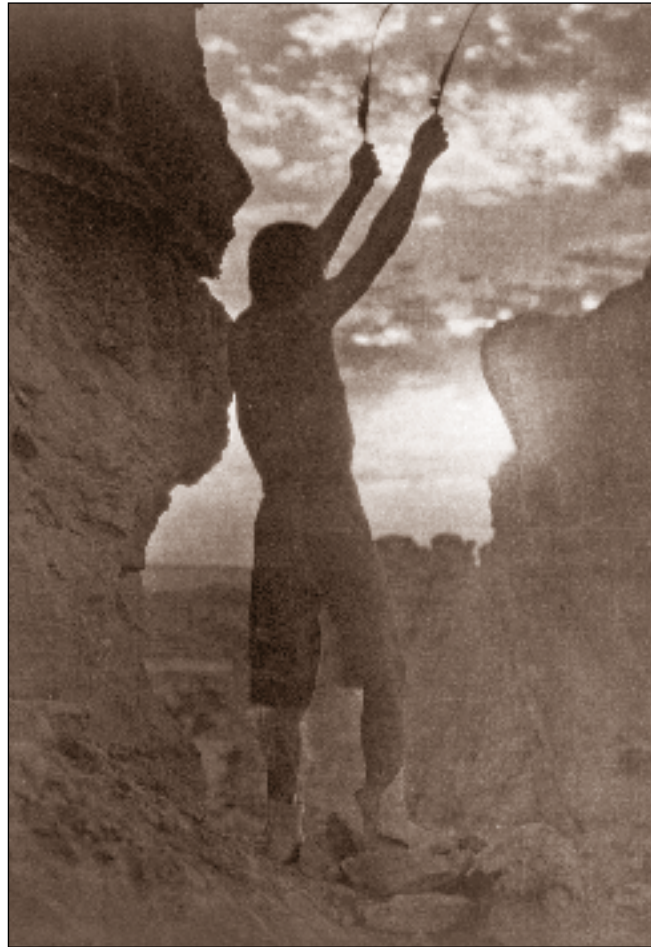
human can carry more filth than those here." Beth had the same reaction, though without her father's lifetime of perspective. "It is positively the most disgusting place I have ever seen and the women and children have never bathed or combed their hair."<sup>8</sup>



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A San Ildefonso Pueblo man holds up two feathers in an offering to the sun.

The photographers were annoyed to find that Christian missionaries, for whom Edward Curtis had little patience, had told the natives to avoid them. Although Northwest Coast culture had severely declined by the late 1920s, Curtis was able to capture some of its earlier glory in his photographs. Volume XX was published in 1930 – the conclusion of a massive documentation of Indians from the Southwest, Plains, Plateau, Northwest Coast, Desert West, northern and central California, and western Alaska.

### Monumental project bankrupts Curtis

Curtis admittedly favored the Indians in his work. He has been criticized by some for romanticizing them, selectively photographing them in classic, “noble” activities and posing them for portraits in fancy regalia rather than modern clothing. But his documentation of our Native American past is unequalled today and *The North American Indian* has been hailed as the most ambitious publishing project since the King James Bible.

It is difficult to imagine the enormity of Curtis’ task.

Not only was he making tens of thousands of negatives throughout the western United States and Canada, but he also acted as the project’s principal ethnographer, fundraiser, publisher, and administrator. He wrote most of the initial drafts for the nearly four thousand pages of ethnographic narrative before submitting the text to the project’s editor, Frederick Webb Hodge.

George Bird Grinnell ... summed up Curtis’ work when he said, in a 1907 issue of *National Geographic*: “The pictures speak for themselves, and the artist who made them is devoted to his work. To accomplish it he has exchanged ease, comfort, home life, for the hardest kind of work, frequent and long-continued separation from his family, the wearing toil of travel through difficult regions, and finally the heartbreaking struggle of winning over to his purpose to primitive people, to whom ambition, time and money mean nothing, but to whom a dream or a cloud in the sky, or a bird flying across the trail from the wrong direction, means much.”<sup>9</sup>

Readers loved the books and the individual photographs, but Curtis faced financial ruin. He was unable to pay his collaborators and, one by one, they found other work. Clara, after their divorce, sued Edward for seven years of unpaid alimony totaling \$4,400. Upon his return from Alaska in October 1927, Seattle police arrested him and he spent two days in jail before appearing with Clara before a judge. King County court records describe the judge asking Curtis about his assets.

“None!”

But you’ve produced all these books, a subscription to which sells for \$3,500. How can you be insolvent?

“I have no funds, your honor. I have no business. Only *The North American Indian* – and for that I get nothing” because J.P. Morgan owns the book rights. The business “operates on a deficit. I work for nothing.”

Flabbergasted, the judge shook his head and asked why Curtis had spent 30 years on the project.

“Your honor, it was my job. The only thing, the only thing I could do that was worth doing. ... I am one of those fanatical persons who wants to finish what he starts.”<sup>10</sup>

The Morgan estate assumed ownership of the book project; Curtis ceded copyright to the pictures and text, only retaining a few subscriptions to sell. But when the final book was published in 1930, the nation’s attention had turned to the Great Depression and *The North American Indian* faded from sight.

Curtis lived hand to mouth for the next several years. He did some more writing and patented a gold dust extractor. This he sold to Cecil B. DeMille, who hired him to shoot a western film called “The Plainsman.” But Curtis was growing weak and ill, and eventually moved



Skohlpa’s braids are wrapped in otter fur and tied with weasel-skin dangles. The young Kalispel woman’s dress is ornamented in shells, and white clay bands her hair.

to the southern California farm owned by Beth and her husband. He died of a heart attack on Oct. 19, 1952 at age 84. *The Seattle Times*, which once had lauded him as one of the city’s most prominent citizens, ran only a 76-word obituary on page 33. Virtually penniless, his estate consisted of a single set of *The North American Indian*, whose 20 volumes occupied five feet of shelf space in his tiny apartment.

It was not until the 1970s that interest in the Curtis masterpiece revived. A Boston bookseller, Charles Lauriat, had acquired many of the bound volumes and thousands of Curtis photographs and copper plates during the Depression. A New Mexico investor purchased this collection and moved it to a gallery in Santa Fe, where it made a sensation. America was experiencing an infatuation with Native American culture, and other Curtis collectors (including the Morgan Library) began displaying and selling his works. Original printings of *The North American Indian* began to fetch high prices at auction. In 1972, a complete set sold for \$20,000. Five years later, another set was auctioned for \$60,500.<sup>11</sup>

A limited edition from Cardozo Fine Art, a historic re-publication including all 20 original volumes, is listed today at \$33,500. A rare copy of the original publication recently sold for \$2.88 million at auction.<sup>12</sup> Though Edward Curtis never profited financially from his magnum opus, a century later he has virtually achieved immortality for his contribution to history.

### ENDNOTES

1. www.edwardcurtis.com.
2. Timothy Egan, *Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher: The Epic Life and Immortal Photographs of Edward Curtis*, 2012.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Egan, *op. cit.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Don D. Fowler, *In a Sacred Manner We Live*, 1972.
7. Egan, *op. cit.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. www.edwardcurtis.com.
10. Egan, *op. cit.*
11. Lita Solis-Cohen, “Art Thieves Know the Product,” *Toledo Blade*, Feb. 9, 1979.
12. www.edwardcurtis.com.

### Volumes: *The North American Indian*

(subjects summarized)

- Vol. I – Navajo, Apache, Jicarillo
- Vol. II – Yuma and 8 other small Southwestern groups
- Vol. III – Sioux
- Vol. IV – Crow, Hidatsa
- Vol. V – Mandan
- Vol. VI – Piegan/Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Arapaho
- Vol. VII – Yakima, Klickitat, Interior Salish, Kootenai
- Vol. VIII – Nez Perce, Walla Walla, Umatilla, Cayuse, Chinook
- Vol. IX – Coastal Salish (Chimakum, Quillite, Willapa)
- Vol. X – Kwakiutl
- Vol. XI – Nootka, Haida
- Vol. XII – Hopi
- Vol. XIII – Klamath and tribes of northern California
- Vol. XIV – Maidu and tribes of northern California
- Vol. XV – Shoshone and tribes of southern California
- Vol. XVI – Tiwa and Keres
- Vol. XVII – Zuni and Tewa
- Vol. XVIII – Cree, Sarsi
- Vol. XIX – Comanche and tribes of Oklahoma
- Vol. XX – Alaskan Eskimo tribes

## Asahel Curtis Rivalled Brother as Photographer

by Chris Rader

Though Asahel and Edward Curtis started their professional careers together, with Asahel working as an apprentice to his older brother, the two parted ways before 1900 and remained at odds with each other for the rest of their lives. Even their wives and children had no contact, though both families lived in the same city (Seattle). Asahel became a noted photographer, focusing on different subjects from Edward but also attaining a national reputation.

Asahel (pronounced Ay-shul) Curtis was born November 5, 1874 in La Sueur County, Minnesota, the youngest child of Johnson and Ellen Curtis. As described in the previous article, Johnson was a traveling preacher with the evangelical United Brethren Church who had trouble providing for his family. The Curtis family relocated to Sidney (later Port Orchard), Wash., in 1888 when Asahel was 14. After the death of their father, Asahel and Edward, 20, did odd jobs and scrounged for food to keep the family alive. Ed moved to Seattle and joined another man in a photography studio. Asahel followed him a few years later, living with Ed and becoming his apprentice. He learned to mix chemicals, develop negatives from exposed glass plates, customize cameras and take photographs.

### Klondike gold rush

More than 100,000 miners began thronging to the Klondike region of Canada's Yukon Territory following discovery of gold there in 1896. The Curtis brothers decided to send Asahel there to take photos of this exciting phenomenon. He boarded the steamship *Rosalie* for Skagway, Alaska, in September 1897 with a camera, tripod, light meter, thousands of glass plates, and developing chemicals. In Skagway he took pictures of gold seekers en route to the gold fields around Dawson City, Yukon. Asahel developed some of these pictures as post cards which he sold to the miners for \$1.50, a decent price considering that a simple meal in a trailside tent restaurant went for \$2.50.<sup>1</sup> He also sent prints and exposed glass plates to Edward, back in Seattle.



Asahel Curtis

Once in Dawson himself the following year, after a difficult passage up the daunting Chilkoot Pass and across icy rivers, Curtis and a partner filed a claim on a small mine on Sulphur Creek. But they were late; most of the productive seams had already been claimed and there wasn't much gold left. Curtis divided his time between working the mine (which never amounted to much), taking photographs, and occasionally hiking back to Skagway to mail his work to Edward. The photos were varied: dog teams pulling heavy sleds, prospectors crossing ice-filled lakes on makeshift rafts, heavily burdened men slogging up the steep Chilkoot Pass, gold-seekers gathered outside the post office or playing cards in a saloon.

He kept a sparse diary, one entry of which described encountering a man who tried to sell him a piece of meat from an animal he claimed to have killed a few minutes earlier. Curtis declined. He was glad of that when, a short distance up the trail, he found the animal from which the man had cut the meat. It appeared to have been dead for a long time.<sup>2</sup>

Asahel returned to Seattle in the summer of 1899. He



Asahel Curtis photographed four men standing outside a cabin in Skagway, Alaska, in early 1898. Skagway was the portal to the Yukon gold rush until prospectors shifted their attention to Nome in 1899.

Washington State Historical Society, 2013.0.3

University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, Klondike 284

found that his brother had published an article in *The Century* magazine titled "The Rush to the Klondike Over the Mountain Passes." The article included Asahel's photographs, but with the caption "Pictures from photographs by the author" followed by Edward's name. Asahel was furious.

There is no evidence that Edward ever went to Alaska or the Yukon during that time period, though he claimed he had. However, the prevailing custom was for photographic studios to retain rights to all production by their employees, so there was no use in Asahel bringing suit against his brother. He left the Curtis Studio and stopped talking to his brother.

What little contact the two had from then on was almost entirely through third parties.... The families lived separate lives, with the children of Edward and Asahel growing up not knowing their cousins. A telegram to Edward informing him of his brother's death in 1941 went unanswered. The strain on mother Ellen and sister Eva, caught in the middle, can only be imagined.<sup>3</sup>

Asahel Curtis was intelligent, short (5' 6") but robust, independent, a nature lover and a hard worker – traits shared with his brother except the height: Ed was six feet tall. Asahel remained clean shaven while Edward wore a beard. Both men were avid mountaineers.

### Married and on his own

Asahel entered a studio partnership with William Romans for a few years. He married Florence Carney in November 1902 and the couple moved to San Francisco, where Asahel found a higher-paying job as a photoengraver. By 1905 they were back in Seattle and Asahel worked as a photographer for *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. He then rejoined the Romans Photographic Company as a photographer and then president-manager.

By 1912, with Romans gone, Curtis brought in Walter Miller as a partner. Five years later, Miller left and Curtis was sole proprietor of the studio (still under the Romans name). The business ad in the city directory boasted of "expert operators to cover the most difficult assignments in the Northwest" and of "lantern slides covering the scenery and industries of the Northwest and Alaska." Another ad declared that "We photograph everything."<sup>4</sup> Over the years Asahel employed his wife, sister Eva, daughter Betty, as well as other darkroom workers and colorists.



Asahel Curtis was a charter member of *The Mountaineers*, a Seattle club. He took this photo of fellow club members crossing a snow field in the Elwha River Canyon on the Olympic Peninsula in 1907.

Asahel Curtis' subject matter was rich and diverse. He photographed leading Seattleites and folks less prominent: people working, fishing, logging, selling vegetables at Pike Place Market, farming with their animals, harvesting apples, relaxing, playing games, marching in parades, milling about city streets. Transportation fascinated him. He captured horse-drawn wagons and carriages, trolleys, trucks, automobiles, trains, small boats, ships and warships, and airplanes.

His client list grew to include the Northern Pacific Railroad, Great Northern and other railways, National Park Service, Bureau of Reclamation, state Bureau of Public Roads, Puget Sound Navigation Company, several construction companies, and the chambers of commerce of Seattle, Spokane and Yakima.<sup>5</sup>

### Founder of *The Mountaineers*

Like his brother Ed, Asahel was enamored of Mount Rainier and the Cascades. He was one of the original founders of the still-active Mountaineers Club of Seattle in 1906 and took thousands of pictures of the landscape and fellow climbers. He made friends with another Mountaineer charter member and photographer, Lawrence Lindsley, who became well known for his work on the eastern slopes of the Cascades. Curtis employed Lindsley in his studio on and off from 1914 to 1931.

Much as he loved the wilderness aspect of Mount Rainier National Park, which had been established in

Washington State Historical Society, 1943.42.43713



Asahel Curtis captured earth-moving projects as Seattle planners sought to make the city flatter. Some property owners fought the regrades. While their claims were pending in court, contractors sluiced around their land, leaving 50 to 60-foot columns of dirt. This photo of the Denny regrade was taken at 4th and Bell streets in 1910.

1899, Curtis also saw the potential of bringing tourists closer to the mountain. He became involved with the Rainier National Park Advisory Board (originally called the Seattle-Tacoma Rainier National Park Committee), chairing it from 1916 to the mid-1930s. The committee was comprised of community businesses interested in promoting tourism and building roads.

America's growing enthusiasm for the automobile, the Good Roads and See America First movements, and the government's generous support of road-building helped expand the popularity of national parks. Mount Rainier NP visitation grew from 30,000 in 1915 to 250,000 in 1929.

Curtis mediated between the automobile clubs, chambers of commerce, and the state highway commissioner on the one hand and NPS officials, the RNPC, and The Mountaineers on the other.... It was said that the main purpose of the Rainier National Park Advisory Board was to coordinate the development of state and county access roads with park roads and to bring various western Washington entities together so that the development of Mount Rainier National Park would not be waylaid by petty rivalries at the local level....



Asahel photographed many scenes of Seattle, including this shot of a busy First Avenue looking north from Pioneer Square on Dec. 31, 1899.

Certainly the NPS had the dominant part in formulating the park's road development plans, but it received an enormous amount of input from Curtis and the Advisory Board. Where the board occasionally proved useful to the NPS was in lobbying members of Congress during the park appropriations process.<sup>6</sup>

Asahel Curtis' photographs helped lure tourists as well as development dollars, including from Congress, to Mount Rainier NP. Some of his photos showed a whimsical side, such as a series taken of young women from Seattle's Mary Ann Wells School of Dance cavorting in ballet costumes with automobiles in the park. Curtis sent a flurry of letters, photos and telegrams

to President Herbert Hoover in the late 1920s promising "paved roads": they succeeded in luring the president to Mount Rainier. However, Curtis was disappointed when a similar campaign failed to bring the following president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, any further west than

Glacier National Park.<sup>7</sup>

Asahel also became active in the state Good Roads Association, becoming its president in 1933. He strongly advocated for highway beautification and landscape preservation as well as for economic development and increased tourism.

#### *Cultivates farm near Yakima*

Asahel, an avid gardener, and Florence purchased just under 10 acres of irrigated land outside Grandview, in the Yakima Valley, in 1907. They and their four children – Walter, Asahel Jr., Betty, and Polly – divided their time between the farm and their home in Seattle. Through the state Good Roads Association Asahel got to know the legendary multimillionaire Sam Hill, who lived in nearby Goldendale and was a fellow promoter of highways and tourism. Hill invited Curtis to photograph his mansion (now the Maryhill Museum) and was an influence on the younger man's roads philosophy.

Hill's expansive nature and his strong, forthright opinions, not to mention his client relationship, would have bound Curtis to him in an attitude of, if not awe, at least one of high esteem. Hill's example shaped Curtis' own advocacy of first-class highways, centralized control of road



Asahel's sense of humor was on display in a series of promotional photographs of Mount Rainier featuring Seattle ballet dancers and cars.



Asahel took this picture of Makah whalers in Neah Bay in 1910. He photographed Native Americans as they were, not attempting to portray them in traditional dress or activities.

development, and a statewide view of the road problem ... where the Cascade Range walled off generally rainy and commercially focused western Washington from the parched east, a larger area with a continental climate and interests centered on agriculture. Farmers often were hostile, not to adequate roads, but to highways built for what they perceived were urban pastimes like touring.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to his home on bluffs above the Columbia River, Hill built the nearby Stonehenge monument, a concrete home near Volunteer Park in Seattle, and the Peace Arch at Blaine, Wash.

The first Curtis home at the Grandview orchard was a three-room cabin. Later they moved into a one-and-a-half story frame bungalow with a shady front porch. The family would ride the Northern Pacific in June, with Florence and the children staying full-time until returning to Seattle when school was about to

start. His daughter Betty recalled that Asahel was only there on weekends, apparently allergic to the dust and pollen at the farm; he would stay for longer periods during harvest time. Young Betty enjoyed the farm life, especially the horses and the old Model T Ford which she learned to drive at age 11. All of the children, when they were old enough, helped Asahel and Florence pick apples and care for other crops.

Winesaps and yellow newtons were the mainstays of the apple crop. Both were good eating and cooking apples, and old, proven varieties. Other types supplanted them in later years, but their lineage and dependability would have appealed to Curtis. Apricots, grapes, and potatoes planted between the tree rows were lesser crops. There was a kitchen garden.<sup>9</sup>

The purpose of the farm was to make money; it was successful some years, but other years the family depended on Asahel's photography studio for income. In the mid-1920s, with the children grown and less interested in leaving the city for the farm in the summertime, Asahel sublet the farm to an Alfred Jensen. Like other Eastern Washington orchards, it succumbed to the Great Depression and was sold at auction to pay for back taxes.

### Asahel's legacy

Asahel Curtis died of a heart attack at age 67, on March 7, 1941. A *Post-Intelligencer* editorial lauded him and declared that most outsiders knew of Washington through his photographs as well as his tireless efforts to promote tourism, Mount Rainier, highways and



Asahel Curtis used imagination and trick photography to emphasize the size and quality of Yakima grapes in this picture.

agriculture.

In 1942 the U.S. Forest Service converted an existing campground into a memorial Asahel Curtis Forest Camp, two acres south and west of the Interstate 90 Snoqualmie Pass summit on Denny Creek. An urn containing his ashes was buried beneath a modest rock crypt. A severe 90-mph wind storm in October 1962 toppled a huge fir tree onto the crypt, destroying it. The Forest Service then converted the campground to the Asahel Curtis Nature Trail, a roadside stop with a half-mile trail through ferns and fir trees.

Though Asahel Curtis' photographs did not achieve the lasting fame of the Indian photos of his brother Edward, they are historically valuable. The brothers had different approaches to their subjects: Edward upholding the past and Asahel praising the commercial future.

Edward -- a master of dramatic lighting, meticulous posing, and exhaustive research -- earned national acclaim for his exhaustive effort to capture in text and photographs every major Indian tribe and Eskimo grouping in North America. He was driven, in part, by his belief that the American Indians were a vanishing race.

Asahel, a whirlwind of activity, was of the what-you-see-is-what-you-get school. He seldom posed subjects. Nor did he bother to pick up litter at a scene, feeling it was a natural part of the landscape. Since many of his photographs were commercial assignments, he reasoned that there was only so much one could do with a shipyard, a dam, a school, a wheat field, or a downtown building.

While compiling a portfolio of virtually every facet of life in the Northwest during the first half of the twentieth century, Asahel earned the respect of the business community for his unflinching efforts to promote Washington state. He also earned the respect of conservationists and lovers of the outdoors.<sup>10</sup>

Some 40,000 of Asahel's photographs are conserved at the Washington State Historical Society in Tacoma.

#### ENDNOTES

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2. Don Duncan, "Asahel Curtis, Photographer," [HistoryLink.org](http://HistoryLink.org), Oct. 28, 2008.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Wilson, *op. cit.*
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## Frank Matsura Photographed Okanogan County

by Chris Rader

Though they probably never met, photographer Frank S. Matsura had several things in common with Edward and Asahel Curtis. He lived in Washington state during the same era, captured images of Native Americans and a developing community, and earned widespread admiration.



Frank Matsura

Matsura, born in Japan c. 1874, came to Seattle in 1901. Two years later he moved to tiny Conconully, in Okanogan County, to work as a cook's helper and laundryman at the Elliott Hotel. The town was struggling after the decline of the Ruby and other mines, but irrigation projects and orchards were attracting new residents. Matsura spent his free time out with his camera shooting public works projects, town events, landscapes and people, developing the pictures in the hotel laundry room.

In 1907 he moved to Okanogan and opened a photography studio. His subject matter continued to expand: orchards and cattle ranches, a large federal irrigation project, men working on the Conconully Dam, sawmills, stables, saloons, schools, men playing baseball, bridges, steamboats on the Okanogan River. He did portraits of men, women and children, including many Native Americans.

Some scholars have compared Matsura's Indian photographs with those of Edward Curtis.

Curtis's work is melancholy, what he claimed was a capturing of the Indian's lives before they disappeared into the past. Matsura, instead, recorded a society in transition. Some of his subjects lived in the traditional teepees, but wore western clothes. Others built houses, routinely interacted with their white neighbors, and took part in the daily life of the towns. Matsura's Indians were individuals, happy families, cowboys and cowgirls... a Chelan Indian man in a bowtie, and Wenatchee and Chelan women and

children on horseback in town for the Fourth of July parade.<sup>1</sup>

Many of Matsura's photographs show his sense of humor. He lined up 11 of Okanogan's bachelors, dressed in their Sunday best, on a railing for a group shot. One photo shows seven children sitting on the back of a cow; another captures three women trying to balance watermelons on their heads. Mickey, a dog belonging to Matsura's friend Judge William C. Brown, appears in several photos including studio shots with pipe and glasses.

Matsura was intelligent, skilled, highly productive, modest and popular. When he died of tuberculosis in June 1913, *The Okanogan Independent* noted that a shadow of sorrow was cast over the community.

Frank Matsura's place in Okanogan city will never be filled. He was a photographer of fine ability and his studio contains a collection of views that form a most complete photographic history of this city and surrounding country covering a period of seven or eight years. He was always on the job. Whenever anything happened Frank was there with his camera to record the event... Furthermore, Frank Matsura was a gentleman in every sense of the word. He held the highest esteem of all who knew him.<sup>2</sup>



Okanogan medicine man Chilliwist Jim

Judge Brown became the executor of Matsura's estate, which included three boxes of prints and negatives. Brown didn't open the boxes until 1954, at which time he donated them to Washington State University.

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1. Hannelore Sudermann, "A Re-dress of the West," *Washington State University magazine*, spring 2015.
2. "Frank S. Matsura," [Wikipedia.org](http://Wikipedia.org).

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Kit Oldham, "Frank Matsura arrives in and begins photographing Okanogan County in 1903," March 4, 2003, [HistoryLink.org](http://HistoryLink.org).



Matsura photographed the steamer Okanogan passing under the Okanogan bridge on the Okanogan River in 1910.





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