



Photo Sensitive

Anne Makepeace Found an Affinity with her Subject in Making *Coming to Light: Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indians*.

by Betsy Bannerman



Anne Makepeace got the inspiration for her latest film in 1990 while riding on the shuttle bus at Sundance with Mark Fishkin, director of the Mill Valley Film Festival. Fishkin began telling her stories about Edward S. Curtis, the photographer who had set out to record the rapidly disappearing legacy of Native Americans at the turn of the 20th century. "As soon as I heard just a little bit about him," Makepeace says, "I realized his story had incredible drama."

A self-taught photographer, Curtis rose from poverty and obscurity to become the most famous photographic artist of his time. Between 1907 and 1930 he produced an epic 20-volume series of photographs, *The North American Indian*. In connection with this incredible publishing feat, Curtis wrote the text for the books, collected some 10,000 wax recordings of Indian songs, shot more than 40,000 photographs of Indians from 80 different tribes and produced a full-length movie, *IN THE LAND OF THE HEADHUNTERS* (1914). By the time of his death in 1952, Curtis had returned to poverty and obscurity, but his work has endured. This month alone, his images can be seen in a new exhibit, *Native to the Land*, at San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art, and in Makepeace's film biography, *COMING TO LIGHT: EDWARD S. CURTIS AND THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS*, which airs on PBS's *American Masters* series.

The Santa Barbara-based Makepeace has been making independent films since the 1980s, when she was enrolled in Stanford University's graduate film program. Both *COMING TO LIGHT* and her earlier personal documentary, *BABY IT'S YOU* (1998) were shown at Sundance and on PBS. *COMING TO LIGHT* has also screened theatrically in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Santa Fe, Philadelphia and a half-dozen other cities.

For the Curtis project, Makepeace initially set out to make a narrative feature. In 1992 she received funding from the California Council for the Humanities, the Arizona Humanities Council and the

National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to research and develop a dramatic script about the photographer. She set the story on the Hopi reservation where Curtis had spent considerable time and had been adopted by a Hopi Snake Priest. Makepeace traveled to Arizona, set up camp on the Hopi reservation and began seeking out the descendants of the Indians Curtis had photographed. She found several of them in attendance at an exhibit of Curtis's Hopi photographs at the Museum of Northern Arizona. For many of these Hopi it was the first time they had seen pictures of their ancestors and, in some cases, of themselves as children.

Makepeace says she was fascinated by the stories the Indians told her about the world depicted in Curtis's photos: the ceremonial dress, hairstyles, props, rituals, dances and family and village life. At the museum exhibit, one Hopi stood his 13-year-old daughter next to a framed photo of a child who was an exact look-alike; it turned out to be the girl's great-grandmother. Makepeace says she thought to herself, "Even if I never get to make a film, this experience has been worth it."

Makepeace submitted a feature screenplay to the NEH in 1994, but the organization's budget had been cut and it was no longer able to continue funding dramas. The PBS series *American Playhouse*, which had expressed interest in underwriting Makepeace's film, had folded. Despite the setbacks, she continued the frustrating task of trying to raise money for the Curtis project. In the meantime she wrote, directed and produced her first documentary, *BABY IT'S YOU*, which intimately examines a modern dilemma, the difficulties a woman in her forties faces when trying to conceive a child for the first time. "It really opened my eyes to the power of documentaries," remembers Makepeace. "How much more fascinating reality can be than stuff you make up."

Makepeace decided to make a historical documentary on Curtis instead of a dramatic feature. (Jed Riffe went through a similar experience in develop-

Top left: Portrait of "A Hopi Man" by photographer Edward S. Curtis. Sikyalestwea, this Hopi Snake Priest, adopted Curtis in 1906 and initiated him in the ways of Snake rituals.

Top right: Anne Makepeace (left) and cinematographer Uta Briesewitz on location in Canyon de Chelly at the Navajo Reservation in Arizona. (Photo by Lewis Wheeler)

Above: "Awaiting the Return of the Snake Racer, Hopi" by Edward S. Curtis. This Hopi boy is decked out to participate in a ceremonial race.

ing his documentary, *ISHI, THE LAST YAH!* on which Makepeace received a screenwriting credit. The two of them originally tried to develop the story as a feature.) The documentary form would permit Makepeace to include many more tribes than just the Hopi, to bring in present-day Native American voices and perspectives, and to film contemporary Indian ceremonies that have survived for centuries. After receiving funds from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the National Endowment for the Arts and a second grant from the NEH—the film's initial budget was around \$400,000—Makepeace began production.

In 1900 Curtis attended a recently outlawed Piegan Sun Dance ceremony in Montana. The ceremony inspired him to begin his great work of documenting Indian culture before it was banned by U.S. authorities or assimilated out of existence. Nearly a hundred years later, in 1998, Makepeace took cinematographer Jennifer Lane and the rest of her crew to southern Alberta in Canada to film the recently revived Peigan Sundance. (The Canadian branch of the tribe spells its name differently.) The ceremony had been brought back to life largely due to the renewed public interest generated by Curtis's photos.

Makepeace's journey to the Peigan lands was just one of the ways in which her photographic odyssey echoed Curtis's. Both of the documentarians faced difficulties in personal relationships back home, mental and physical challenges, problems raising money and setbacks in the field due to equipment trouble, weather, travel and scheduling. For both there was also the all-important struggle to gain the trust of Indians who might be wary of yet

burns for each tribe, and showed them to contemporary Indians, filming their reactions to the photos. She also taped interviews with several Curtis scholars and such authorities as Crow tribal historian Dr. Joe Medicine Crow, Blackfeet filmmaker George Burdeau and Kwakiutl anthropologist Gloria Cranmer Webster. Makepeace says that many of the scholars held conflicting viewpoints, which helped her bring balance to the film. "I didn't set out with a specific point of view on Curtis," she says. "I discovered all the points of view that are in the film and tried to give voice to them all, so there would be a complete and complex telling of his story."

Several scholars refused to be interviewed, telling Makepeace, "I know about these NEH projects. You spend years working on them and they never get made." Now that the film has been honored by the American Historical Association, Makepeace hopes these nay-sayers will be squirming with regret.

When Makepeace and Bay Area editor Jennifer Chinlund started assembling the initial footage into a rough-cut, they had over a hundred hours of interviews. "Anne might have talked to somebody for three hours," Chinlund says, "and you'd never know where there might be some little nugget." Makepeace had been asked to submit a documentary script to NEH as part of her application for production funding—a process she feels "didn't make a lot of sense" for someone preparing to shoot an open-ended documentary—and using this script as a loose framework, Chinlund made a first cut. It was ten hours long. "You start with this sort of mess," Makepeace says, "and you pare it down and pare it down, and slowly the structure is built up."

Chinlund and Makepeace decided they needed more visual material on Curtis's life. "The hardest part in making a historical documentary," Makepeace says, "is bringing people to life when you have little or no motion picture footage of them." In fact she had only one 40-second clip of Curtis fooling around while stuck on a sandbar in the Bering Sea. So her next search was for material on Curtis's background, family, career and life experiences.

Fortunately, Curtis's only living grandson had family pictures, letters, journals and memorabilia, much of which had never been made available to the public before. Makepeace says she carried on an eight-year correspondence with the grandson before he felt ready to trust her with the material. "He was reluctant because of all the Curtis-bashing that has occurred over the past 20 years. Curtis has been criticized for posing his subjects, for filming Indian ceremonies and for sometimes reconstructing Indian life in ways that it was no longer lived." In the end, Curtis's grandson opened his entire collection to Makepeace and her crew.

Makepeace turned Curtis's letters and journals into voiceover segments performed by actor Bill Pullman, with accompanying recreated footage of letters being typed on a vintage typewriter. Family photos helped flesh out the story of Curtis's life, and footage of 1920s Hollywood films, including DeMille's *TEN COMMANDMENTS* and the Elmo Lincoln *TARZAN* films, for which Curtis acted as a still photographer, was dubbed from rented video copies after it was determined that those films are in the public

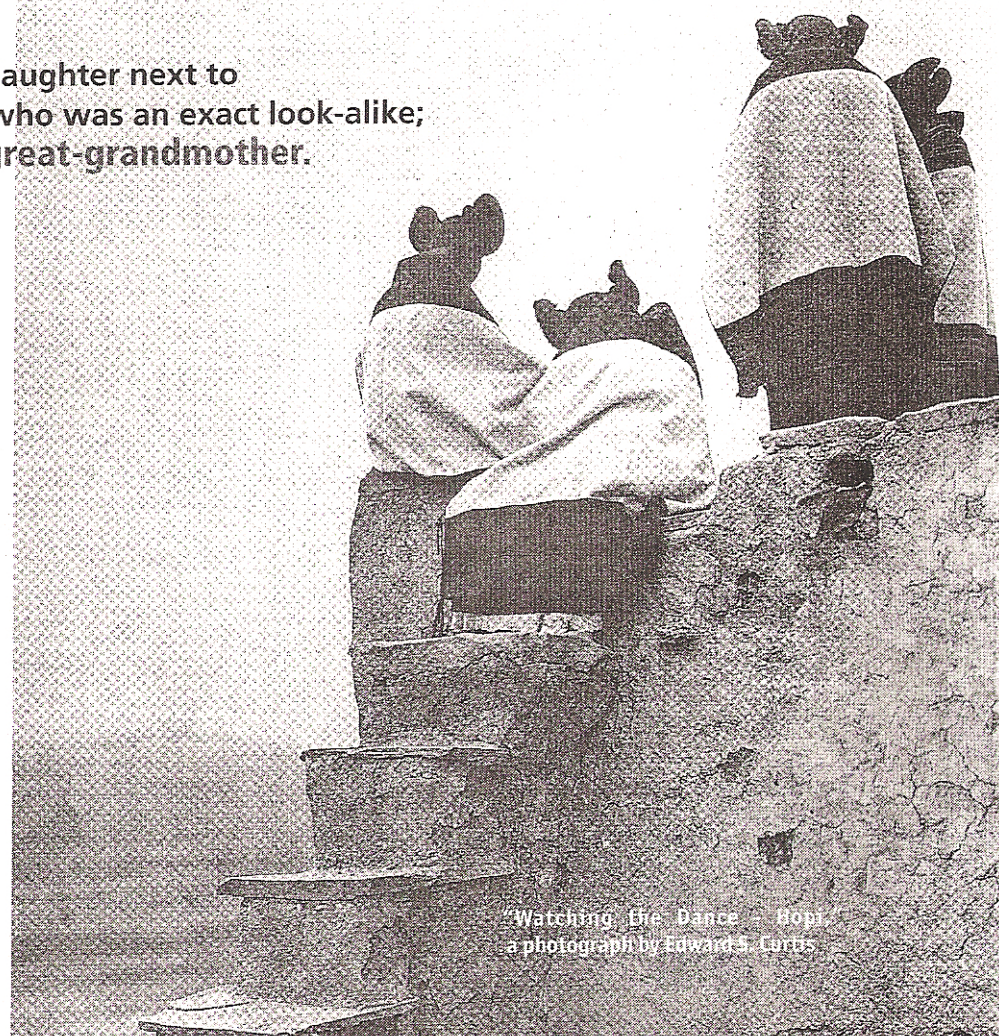
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One Hopi stood his 13-year-old daughter next to a framed photo of a child who was an exact look-alike; it turned out to be the girl's great-grandmother.

another white person coming to invade their privacy, to expose and possibly corrupt their sacred rituals and to romanticize, falsify or exploit their way of life. And for both, despite the frustrations, tedium, confusion, anxiety and occasional mishaps inherent in being a documentarian, there were transcendent moments that, as Makepeace notes, "made me see what must have kept Curtis going" for 30-plus years.

Makepeace's photographic journey lasted two years. The film, which was shot on mini-DV, was finished just in time for its world premiere at Sundance 2000. Thanks to additional funds from co-producer *American Masters*/WNET, Makepeace had been able to extend its running time from 56 to 85 minutes. (There is also a one-hour version for foreign and educational markets.) The film went on to accumulate best documentary awards at six film festivals and was honored with the prestigious John O'Connor Award presented by the American Historical Association.

Research continued throughout the making of *COMING TO LIGHT*. "It's just a lot of work, a lot of digging, like a detective trail," Makepeace says. To start, she sought out the photos Curtis had taken at the reservations where she intended to film. These she found in museums, libraries and private collections all over the West. She then made color xeroxes of the sepia-toned photographs, organized them into al-



Watching the Dance - Hopi, a photograph by Edward S. Curtis

domain. One-of-a-kind posters advertising IN THE LAND OF THE HEADHUNTERS were tracked down in Los Angeles.

Researcher Patti Tauscher unearthed period newspaper headlines at the University of Washington in Seattle and journeyed to the National Archives and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., where she found archival moving picture footage of trains, mules and wagons and military-type schools for Indian children, as well as photos of Theodore Roosevelt's children playing with Curtis. "Whenever you find something that works, it's incredible," Tauscher says. She also notes that she learned the delicate art of working with the curators of large collections. "There's always this balancing act of pushing to get what you want, yet not pissing anybody off. I mean, you're not the only researcher there. And they know the collection better than you do."

The National Archives charged only a duplication fee and no use fees, so the cost turned out to be much cheaper than securing similar shots from stock footage houses. At the Library of Congress an intern on the film was allowed to videotape every unpublished Curtis photograph of the tribes Makepeace had visited. The Library would not permit lights and a tripod to be used for this process, so the resulting images were not of broadcast quality; but Makepeace ended up with six hours of video from which freeze frames of the photos could be drawn and inserted into the rough-cut. If something worked well, a clean print of that particular photo was ordered. Those

photos were then lit and shot by San Francisco cinematographer Emiko Omori, whom Makepeace calls "our live animation stand."

Omori also shot many of the historical reenactment scenes, which were created to serve as cutaways from the talking heads, as illustrations for voiceover readings and narration, and perhaps most importantly, as dramatic highlights. For these scenes, photo-historian Rod Slemmons loaned Makepeace some of the same still and movie cameras that Curtis had used. (Slemmons appears in the film as a stand-in for Curtis, taking photographs and

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cranking a movie camera. He is also seen running an old slide projector and developing glass negatives that reappear in a dramatic scene of the plates being broken.) The wax cylinder recorder that Curtis had used to record Indian songs was found in pieces in the basement of Lois Flury's gallery in Seattle (which specializes in Curtis's photographs) and was put back together by a production assistant so that it actually worked when needed for a reenactment. A production designer was hired to look at pictures of Curtis's field camps, in order to accurately recreate the tents and various equipment.

Makepeace and her crew experienced occasional problems in the field. Camerawoman Jennifer Lane, after getting some beautiful footage of a traditional Suquamish canoe journey, fell into Puget

the crew from getting to Nunivak Island in Alaska, just as it had temporarily turned away and nearly killed Curtis a century earlier. A Blood Indian threatened to confiscate one of Makepeace's albums of photocopied images. The Navajo people refused to talk about Curtis's portraits, because they don't like to mention those who have died. "They'd just say, 'I dunno' and change the subject," Makepeace says. Some interviewees never showed up, and one Nunivak Islander, whom the crew had been looking for all day, briefly appears in the film coming up to

Makepeace and Lane, glancing at a picture of himself as a baby, then speeding away in his truck. "He was like, 'Been there, seen that, big deal, I'm out of here,'" Makepeace laughs. "It wasn't at all what I wanted. But in the end I liked it for his energy and that it was such a different reaction. Sometimes the things you have on your agenda don't happen, but even better things do. My method on this shoot, if it can be called a method, was to shoot everything and figure it out later."

Despite all the difficulties she faced, Makepeace says there were many magical moments as well. In the middle of editing, the once-outlawed Kwakiutl potlatch ceremony was performed, and Makepeace and co-cinematographer Uta Briesewitz flew to Vancouver Island to capture it, filming the

same dances and masks that had appeared in Curtis's 1914 movie. At another point she found herself in Canyon de Chelly on the Navajo reservation, the site of her original feature screenplay about Curtis. Working inside a hogan with Briesewitz, Makepeace filmed Navajo Dan Staley as he quietly composed, then erased, an exquisite sand painting, one of those elusive creations that Curtis himself had photographed with such difficulty.

Through the use of feedback screenings and continued research, the film gradually took shape. Visual segments were added, moved around or removed altogether. Jennifer Chinlund recalls the chaos that swirled through her home as the Sundance deadline approached. One person might be shooting scratch footage of photos on the floor, while another talked on the phone with museums, and still others set up VHS dubs for festival submissions or searched through the 2,000-plus Curtis photo collection to find just the right picture to go with a line delivered by narrator Sheila Tousey. Meanwhile, Bay Area composer Todd Boekelheide was composing the haunting music for the film's score, which he expanded after the Sundance screening.

Chinlund's favorite moments during editing occurred while interweaving Curtis's life story with the reactions of contemporary Native Americans. One device she used was to dissolve from a photo being held and discussed by a modern-day Indian to that same photo in its pristine, original version. Chinlund also found resonances between Curtis's images—for instance, a photo that features a bowl of piki (a blue corn meal mixture)—and Makepeace's footage—such

as a contemporary Native American stirring piki in a bowl. The modern bowl might be Tupperware instead of traditional pottery, but Chinlund found the similarity enchanting. "I'm always looking for those visual connections when I'm editing," she says, "whether they're emotional or past-present or shapes that are similar."

One of the ironic discoveries Makepeace made when first showing Curtis's photos to the Hopi was that, as she put it, "They weren't that interested in the photographer"—who was, after all, the subject of her film. Instead, she says, "They were interested in the way their own ancestors were presenting themselves for the future, for them." So Makepeace was faced with the challenge of balancing the chronological story of Curtis's life with the feelings the Indians had about Curtis's images.

One theme Makepeace carries throughout the film is the importance of the Indians' religious ceremonies, not only to the tribes but to Curtis himself. The Sun Dance set Curtis on his original path, the Snake Dance enabled him to enter the Hopi culture. A challenge for Makepeace, as it had been for Curtis, lay in trying to enter into and show the Native American worldview without offending anyone. For instance, Makepeace was allowed to shoot only part of the Peigan Sun Dance; the rest of the ritual was considered sacred. More provocatively, she used pictures that Curtis had taken of the Hopi Snake Hunt, which Curtis had copyrighted but never published. Makepeace says she isn't sure whether Curtis held back these images because their content was sensitive to the Hopi or because he just didn't like the

prints. She herself struggled with the issue of whether or not to use the images, but finally decided to include some of them in the film, as well as a short snippet of the Snake Dance from a Thomas Edison film of 1900.

Makepeace has sent copies of her film to all the tribes, including the Hopi, and has had "an overwhelmingly positive response," although she has heard from only a few Hopi friends. "I do have a conflict about (including the Snake Ceremony)," she says. "I have relationships with the Hopi that are very important to me." She has made peace with her decision by reminding herself that the images are out there, that people allowed themselves to be photographed in the ceremony, that it's educational for the Native American children of today to see these images, and that they show the deep involvement and passion which Curtis felt for the people he came to know and document.

Makepeace is currently writing a book about Edward S. Curtis for National Geographic Books and says she might consider revisiting the idea of doing a dramatic feature about him. "I hope I've created a moving story that captures some of the man and his work," she says. "But I have so much more material about him—it's tempting." □

COMING TO LIGHT: EDWARD S. CURTIS AND THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS will be broadcast on the PBS American Masters series on April 23.

Freelance writer Betsy Bannerman reported on the making of LIVE NUDE GIRLS UNITE! in the October 2000 issue of Release Print.