

Retracing the Path of a Photographer's 30-Year Quest

By TED LOOS

THE photographer Edward S. Curtis traveled the continent for 30 years to create his epic, 20-volume series "The North American Indian." In his quest to take pictures — more than 40,000 before he was through — he ruined his life.

Nearly a century after Curtis began his project, the filmmaker Anne Makepeace shadowed him, making her own images during a decade of on-and-off work. Though her path was certainly easier, she got more of a taste for his struggles than she bargained for.

"There were so many parallels," Ms. Makepeace said. "I had to find a respected person on each reservation who would be my liaison; I had to keep running back to the East Coast to raise money just like he did. It put a huge strain on my marriage and my personal life."

The result of her labor is the documentary "Coming to Light: Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indians," which has its broadcast premiere tomorrow night on PBS as part of WNET's "American Masters" series.

"Not only was there incredible artistry and soulfulness in his pictures, he had an amazing story himself," Ms. Makepeace said, explaining why she was compelled to honor Curtis's journeys with her own.

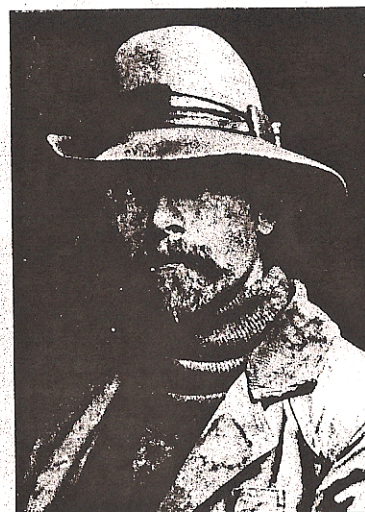
Though Curtis is hardly a household name, his work is familiar to many. The sepia-toned photographs of Indians that he produced from 1900 to 1930 — especially the monumental, close-up portraits — are by now a part of the collective consciousness.

Curtis tried to document every tribe at a time when cultures were rapidly dying out. "At the beginning, he thought it would take him five years," Ms. Makepeace said. "In fact, it took 30 years." As one commentator in the film puts it, it may have been the largest anthropological project ever undertaken.

At first Curtis was supported by President Theodore Roosevelt and, financially, by J. P. Morgan. But by the end, he was run-



Photographs by Edward S. Curtis/"American Masters"



Edward S. Curtis in 1899, above. From 1900 to 1930, Curtis took more than 40,000 photographs of Indians; at left, a Hopi in snake dancer costume.

ning on empty. "He sacrificed his marriage and his health," Ms. Makepeace said. "He died totally broke in complete obscurity and poverty, despite having actually accomplished the feat he set out to do."

Her own project, "Coming to Light," took a major detour, from a planned feature film to the 85-minute documentary it became. Among her other films is "Baby, It's You" (1998), a first-person documentary about her struggle to conceive a child.

"Making that film completely opened my eyes to the power of documentary," Ms. Makepeace, 52, said on the phone from her home in Santa Barbara, Calif. "Reality is so much more bizarre and interesting than anything I can make up anyway."

She focused "Coming to Light" on Curtis's interactions with the Indians he met, and set out to the reservations herself to find descendants of his subjects — or, in some cases, the subjects themselves, who had originally appeared as children. This

A documentary goes back to the reservations where Edward S. Curtis created his images.

required a set of people skills that went beyond the usual schmoozing required of a filmmaker.

"Anne spent years getting to know these people," said Susan Lacy, the executive producer of "American Masters." "She's very persuasive, and immediately trustworthy."

The depth of Ms. Makepeace's research gives her film a personal quality. "She really nailed it," said Hartman Lomawaima, the associate director of the Arizona State Museum and a member of the Hopi tribe, who helped Ms. Makepeace with her work there. "She got as many perspectives as are out there — not only in terms of scholarship but also from the tribal representatives themselves."

Working with liaisons, Ms. Makepeace organized events at community centers on reservations. She displayed copies of the original Curtis photographs, hoping for a flicker of recognition. She also took them door to door.

"It was a lot of detective work," she said. "But then someone would come up to me and say, 'That's my mother!'" The first woman to say that was 82-year-old Ethel Mahle, who ended up adopting Ms. Makepeace as her Hopi daughter before she died earlier this year.

Not every reaction was welcoming. While the camera was rolling, one member of the Blood tribe in Alberta threatened to confiscate Ms. Makepeace's copies of the Curtis photographs, and she kept the uncomfortable encounter in the film. "That's a scene I never asked for, and I never wanted it," she said. "But when I saw it in the edit, I felt it had a real energy in it."

Since Curtis's work was rediscovered in the 1970's, he has been criticized for staging his images. Curtis doctored his photographs to remove modern conveniences — an

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Ted Loos writes frequently about film and art.

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alarm clock was erased from one scene, which the documentary presents as standard ethnographic procedure. He also dressed his subjects in elaborate ceremonial costumes that they rarely wore.

As recounted in "Coming to Light," he once rented a dead whale from a commercial whaling station for his film "In the Land of the Headhunters," making it look as though a hunting party had killed it. He also photographed ceremonial rites that some feel should never have been recorded.

"When I set out for reservations, I expected people to be a lot more critical," Ms. Makepeace said. "But in general, the people who criticize

Curtis are not Indians, they're people in academia who need to make a point." She included that perspective in the film, but stressed that for many Indians the photographs serve as a kind of "family album." Sometimes they are also the only documentation of now extinct facets of tribal life.

"If he didn't come along and record this, the loss would have been tremendous — an incalculable loss," George Horse Capture, deputy director of the National Museum of the American Indian, says in the film. He adds that although some elements of the photographs were props, "you can't stage the eyes and the determination" of the subjects, including his own great-grandfather.

Ms. Makepeace didn't set out to resolve the political and social quandaries posed by Curtis's work. Since she first heard the details of Curtis's life from a friend in the 1980's, she was captivated by his personal conviction.

"He had unbelievable ambition and hubris," she said, pointing out that he was from a Midwestern farm family and taught himself photography after moving west. "Somehow in his mid-20's, he was the most famous society photographer in Seattle. Ten

years after that, he was the most famous photographer in America."

Ms. Makepeace took full advantage of modern conveniences in her effort to document Curtis's unusual trajectory. "My process, which took 10 years with cell phones and FedEx, was nothing compared to what Curtis went through," she said.

SHE even got delayed on the way to Nunivak Island in Alaska, not far from where Curtis was stranded almost 70 years ago on his last photographic expedition. "It's pretty remote, and we were weathered in for four days," said Ms. Makepeace, who traveled by plane where Curtis had gone by boat. "We didn't almost die on a sandbar like Curtis, though. I just went to sleep for four days."

She had one non-technological advantage in her dealings with Indians: a surname that, despite being what she called "old Yankee" in origin, can sound like a traditional tribal name. "A lot of Hopis commented on that," Mr. Lomawaima said. "In the literature on Hopi, they call us the people of peace. So they thought, well, Anne Make Peace is coming, so this must be a good thing." □