

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 turn-

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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 as children. This had originally appeared as children.

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 doctor'd his photographs to remove modern conveniences — an

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