

Coming to Light: Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indians

(Docu)

A co-production of Anne Makepeace Prods. and Thirteen/WNET for American Masters. Produced by Makepeace. Executive producer (for American Masters), Susan Lacy. Directed, written by Anne Makepeace.

Narrator: Sheila Tousey.

Voice of Edward Curtis: Bill Pullman.

By TODD MCCARTHY

The Odyssean photographic career and poignantly forlorn private life of Edward S. Curtis are charted with impressive sensitivity by Anne Makepeace in this overdue and very welcome docu portrait. Famous in his prime for his exhaustive documentation of traditional American Indian life throughout the West during the first three decades of the 20th century, Curtis suffered as his reputation went into total eclipse during the last part of his long life; his staggering accomplishments were only recognized again in the '70s, beginning a rediscovery process that continues with this film. Destined for PBS airing in the fall, this fine American Masters entry will have a healthy life as an educational video and could find fest and select theatrical slots prior to broadcast.

Curtis' overriding ambition was "to capture what he called the beautiful in American Indian life." To this end, he spent the better part of 30 years working on the 20-volume "The North American Indian," taking upwards of 40,000 photographs of 80 different tribes and making 10,000 wax recordings of Indian songs and an early ethnographic film along the way.

The incessant travel and fundraising involved were as arduous for him as his prolonged absences were damaging to his family; once the project was completed in 1930, it was all over for him, although he lived another 22 years in impoverished obscurity.

It's an outstanding subject, one that Makepeace first conceived in the early '90s as a dramatic feature but which emerges compellingly in

docu form; the general shape of the life as well as the details are compelling unto themselves, and are enhanced by the writer-director's good storytelling sense and the abundant sampling of Curtis' work. The most successful society photographer in 1890s Seattle, Curtis became fascinated with Native Americans during a trip to Alaska, and his anticipation of Indian assimilation into general society motivated his desire to begin photographing them in their traditional garb where they lived. His privileged glimpse in 1900 of a recently forbidden Peigan sun dance intensified this urge, and the personal enthusiasm of Theodore Roosevelt and eventual backing of J.P. Morgan set Curtis upon his epic undertaking.

For the most part leaving his wife and children behind in Seattle, Curtis spent months at a time living in difficult conditions with his subjects on shoots that required large crews and up to a ton of equipment. He also made 125 trips to New York City over the years to oversee printing and raise more funds. He used his first movie camera to film a dance on the Navajo reservation in 1904, and three years later the first volume of the photographic history was published. His work continued apace, but in 1911, with only eight volumes produced, Morgan's support expired, and Curtis was forced to diversify to stay afloat. The vicissitudes of the next decade included a "musicale" tour and a well-received film, "In the Land of the Head Hunters," neither of which made money; the dwindling of public interest in Indian subjects during World War I; a bitter divorce that cleaned Curtis out financially; and a suspension of work on the history. By the early '20s he was working in Hollywood, as still photographer on the Elmo Lincoln Tarzan pictures and De Mille's "The Ten Commandments." But after three years of this, and alarmed by how rapidly traditional Indian life was disappearing, he returned to his life's project, making his final trip into the field in 1927 and publishing the concluding volume 20 three years later, when he was 62 and Indian subjects had again passed from fashion with the Depression. Having long since given all his photos to a Boston museum, he died in Los Angeles in 1952.

With a profound vividness, Curtis' photos evoke a civilization that has vanished, one marked most notably by pained but proud faces, many of them withered and lined by hardship and the elements. Particulars of dress and ceremonial accoutrements are also given significant attention, and while criticism of Curtis is noted — one historian attacks him for putting "costumes" on his subjects and romanticizing them — this is far outweighed, in the opinion of Indians themselves, by the "monumental job" Curtis did in documenting their history; the only visual images many contemporary Indians have of their ancestors is in

his work, and the long-abandoned Peigan sun dance was revived in 1977 with the indispensable help of Curtis' 1900 photographs. Makepeace's sturdily made film reps an admirable account of an artist whose dedication to his work became an obsession, to the detriment of all other aspects of his life except for posterity.

Camera (B&W/color), Uta Briesewitz, Jennifer Lane, Emiko Omori; editor, Jennifer Chinlund; music, Todd Boekelheide; associate producer, Candace Schermerhorn. Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (competing), Jan. 28, 2000. Running time: 85 MIN.