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INTRODUCTION TO THE PHOTOGRAPHS

In the course of over sixty years, many books have been published about Edward Sheriff Curtis and his photographic documentation of the American Indian people. His monumental documentation, *The North American Indian*, is considered the most important photographic work ever created. Between the years 1898 and 1930 Curtis photographed basically every major tribe west of the Mississippi river. The end result was the creation of Curtis' *The North American Indian* which is a series of 20 volumes and 20 accompanying portfolios offered in a set format. So the question to be asked is why is this book any different than all the others? The answer is that previous editors have far too often chosen the same images over and over again to illustrate their publications. The majority of the images previously used were portfolio size images which were loosely bound and therefore easier to handle and reproduce. The bound volumes, however, were much more difficult to reproduce and therefore were basically ignored. I am happy to say that almost every image printed in this book is a volume size image of which the majority have never seen the light of day until now.

In order to have a better understanding of the photographs of Edward Curtis I would like to point out a fact of Curtis' work that has never really been discussed. By 1898 when Curtis started to photograph the Indian people most photographers were quickly abandoning their cumbersome large format glass plate cameras for the new "instantaneous" cameras Kodak was then selling. These hand-held gelatin roll film cameras allowed for the possibility of a new "shoot from the hip" approach to photography. Edward Curtis, however, never gave up his use of the old-style glass plate negative camera. This is important to understand because these cameras required a tripod on which to secure the camera and meant that every subject was very much aware of Curtis' presence and was a willing participant in the photographic process. When one looks at the portraits you become aware of a trust that Curtis must have conveyed to his subject and they back to him.

Moki melon eaters (A).
Hopi Pueblo

Moki melon eaters (B).

Moki melon eaters (C).

I have included a sequence of five photographs Curtis took of two Hopi children eating watermelon. This rare view of Curtis' field work allows us to become our own editor of his work. The image chosen to be published in volume 12 of *The North American Indian* was the bottom image entitled "The delights of childhood." I may have chosen another image. Which image would you have chosen?

Finally, there are two other facts concerning Curtis and *The North American Indian* that are important to understand. The reason that Curtis' work is considered to be so significant is that no other photographer documented so many different Native American people. It is estimated he photographed over eighty different tribes or sub-tribes in his thirty-year journey. There were photographers that were much earlier than Curtis as well as photographers that may have documented a specific tribe or region, but never another photographer that had opportunity to document so many people. The other fact concerning Curtis' work is that no other photographer had the good fortune as Curtis did to see his life's work compiled into such a unique set of books and portfolios.

It was certainly Edward Curtis' destiny to be the right man, at the right time, to photograph the Indian people that he thought would become a "Vanishing Race." Fortunately, the Native American did not vanish, but their life and lifestyle did change. We can thank Edward Sheriff Curtis for capturing a moment of time preserved in images of a proud and beautiful people.

Moki melon eaters (D).

The delights of childhood.

—Bob Kapoun
Santa Fe, New Mexico

"Introduction to the Photographs" of *The Image Taker* by Bob Kapoun

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