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Front Matter

Source: *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Winter, 1988), pp. 1-76

Published by: Montana Historical Society

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4519111>

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# MONTANA

Winter 1988  
\$5.00

The Magazine of Western History



INDIAN WITH DEER—oil, by Victor Higgins, ca. 1925



North American Indian, vol. 4

“Passing the Cliff—Apsaroke” by Edward S. Curtis

Amateur ethnologist Edward S. Curtis had taken hundreds of photographs of western Indians and even made a motion picture of sacred Navajo ceremonies before he persuaded financier John P. Morgan in 1906 to underwrite his dream—a photographic study of Indians and Indian life in North America. The study, which consumed Curtis's life for nearly twenty-five years, was eventually published in twenty volumes with over fifteen hundred photographs.

In *The North American Indian*, Curtis photographed Indians in natural settings, such as in “Passing the Cliff—Apsaroke,” to document a way of life that was in the process of radical change. Members of the last generation of Indians to live in the traditional ways were still alive, facing new lives on reservations and raising families in a new environment. Through his photographs, Curtis hoped to communicate the richness and power inherent in Indians' lives and to counteract the “worse than criminal” treatment of Indians by whites.

Curtis visited Indian settlements and reservations, from Haidas and Bella Coolas in British Columbia to Apaches and Zunis in the Southwest. Although he has often been criticized for clothing his subjects inappropriately and posing them in ways that have been characterized as idealized and even racist, Curtis was more sensitive to Indian people than most of his contemporaries and the ethnographic information he collected still informs us about these people's histories. His stunning images have enormous emotional content and communicate the artist's exceptional identification with his subjects.

## A Publication of the Montana Historical Society

*Montana the Magazine of Western History* is published quarterly by the Montana Historical Society, an agency of the state of Montana, at 225 N. Roberts St., Helena, MT 59620. Subscriptions, which include membership in the Society, are \$18.00 per year, \$30.00 for two years. For foreign subscriptions, add \$10.00 per year for postage. Changes of address and inquiries about subscriptions and advertising should be directed to Chris Eby, Production/Circulation Manager. Copies of most back issues are available from the Society. Prospective authors are encouraged to send a letter of inquiry before submitting manuscripts. Unsolicited manuscripts cannot be returned unless postage is provided. Authors are responsible for the interpretations in their articles. All correspondence about book reviews and review copies should be addressed to Dr. Michael P. Malone, College of Graduate Studies, Montana State University, Bozeman, MT 59717. Articles are abstracted and indexed in *Historical Abstracts and America: History and Life*, Santa Barbara, California; *Arts & Humanities Citation Index*, Institute for Scientific Information, Philadelphia. Second-class postage paid at Helena, MT. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Montana Historical Society, Capitol Station, Helena, MT 59620.

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WINTER 1988  
VOLUME 38 NUMBER 1

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