

## **Native American Removal Activity**

Station B: Edward Curtis and *The North American Indian*

### Directions:

**Part I.** Read the following selection from Edward S. Curtis's introduction to *The North American Indian*:

**Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian*, Vol. 1 (1907)**

#### **General Introduction**

The value of [this] work, in great measure, will lie in the breadth of its treatment, in its wealth of illustration, and in the fact that it represents the result of personal study of a people who are rapidly losing the traces of their aboriginal character and who are destined ultimately to become assimilated with the "superior race" ....The task has not been an easy one, for although lightened at times by the readiness of the Indians to impart their knowledge, it more often required days and weeks of patient endeavor before my assistants and I succeeded in overcoming the deep-rooted superstition, conservatism, and secretiveness so characteristic of primitive people, who are ever loath to afford a glimpse of their inner life to those who are not of their own.

It is...near to Nature that much of the life of the Indian still is; hence its story, rather than being replete with statistics of commercial conquests, is a record of the Indian's relations with and his dependence on the phenomena of the universe —the trees and shrubs, the sun and stars, the lightning and rain, - for these to him are animate creatures. Even more than that, they are deified, therefore are revered and propitiated, since upon them man must depend for his well-being. To the workaday man of our own race the life of the Indian is just as incomprehensible as are the complexities of civilization to the mind of the untutored savage.

Though the treatment accorded the Indians by those who lay claim to civilization and Christianity has in many cases been worse than criminal, a rehearsal of these wrongs does not properly find a place here. Whenever it may be necessary to refer to some of the unfortunate relations that have existed between the Indians and the white race, it will be done in that unbiased manner becoming the student of history. As a body politic recognizing no individual ownership of lands, each Indian tribe naturally resented encroachment by another race, and found it impossible to relinquish without a struggle that which belonged to their people from time immemorial. On the other hand, the white man whose very own may have been killed or captured by a party of hostiles forced to the warpath by the machinations of some unscrupulous Government employe, can see nothing that is good in the Indian. There are...two sides to the story, and in these volumes such questions must be treated with impartiality....

...When the last opportunity for study of the living tribes shall have passed with the Indians themselves, and the day cannot be far off, my generous friends may then feel that they have aided in a work the results of which, let it be hoped, will grow more valuable as time goes on.

**Part II.** Review Curtis's photographs, which formed the basis for *The North American Indian* (NOTE: black-and-white images are the original photographic negatives; while the sepia-toned images are the final plates included in the book). Then answer the following questions.

1. How do Curtis's photographs propagate the "myth of the vanishing race"?
2. Compare the original photographic negatives (black and white images) to the final photographic plates used in *The North American Indian* (sepia-toned images). How are they similar? How are they different? Why do you think Curtis used the sepia-toned plates in his book, and not the original negatives?
3. Compare the photographic negative "In a Piegan lodge" with its sepia-toned final version (plate no. 188). There is one major difference between the two images. What does this difference tell us about Curtis's project? How does this difference change your opinion of Curtis?
4. Students often consider photographs to be an unbiased source. After reading Curtis's introduction and looking at his photos, think about ways photos can have a bias, or even an argument. How can photographers use their medium to influence viewers?
5. After viewing these images, how do you feel about Curtis's thesis of Native Americans as a "vanishing race"? Do you think it is valid or invalid? Do you think he accurately portrayed his subjects?