



Two Views, Two Voices: The Stereoscopic Perspective of Photographers Asahel and Edward Curtis

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By Stephanie Lile

Asahel and Edward Curtis were born into the Victorian Age, during a time of innovation, invention and industrialization in the United States. The brothers were teenagers, Edward, 19, and Asahel, 14, when their family moved from Minnesota to Washington in search of a better life. Edward and his father, Asahel "Johnson" Curtis, were the first members of the family to make the transcontinental journey, settling near Port Orchard in 1887. Mrs. Curtis, Asahel, and his younger sister Eva stayed in Minnesota with the eldest Curtis son, Raymond, through the winter, and then traveled west in the spring of 1888.

In that year before statehood the Washington they experienced was a rapidly changing place. The railroad, with the Northern Pacific's first direct transcontinental route to Puget Sound completed in 1887, opened the territory to development. Methods for building hard-surfaced roads, harvesting natural resources and utilizing electricity were already in use throughout the eastern United States. Word of the automobile and telephone, then novelties in personal transport and communication, spread across the country. And in the midst of adapting and bringing existing technologies to the western landscape, Northwesterners at work in the wheat fields, timberlands, and fishing banks of Washington were conjuring technological innovations of their own.

The sidehill leveling device used in the wheat harvest, the "Iron Chink" fish cleaning machine, and the deep woods steam donkey were all being put to use. Across America domestic and vocational processes were being mechanized. Inventions such as the electric light bulb, phonograph, Linotype printing machine, radio, flush toilet and airplane, all developed or improved upon between 1880 and 1915, changed the lives of all Americans. Great innovations in photography also occurred during this time.

While the development of daguerreotypes (single photographic images created on silver or silver-coated copper plates) had revolutionized photography earlier in the 19th century, it was the mass production of gelatin dry-plates during the 1880s that made the Curtis brothers' field photography possible. These chemically treated glass plates shortened exposure times, allowing subjects to be photographed in motion, and yielded negatives from which images could be printed, again and again.

Intrigued with the technology, Edward had built his first camera when he was a boy, using a stereopticon lens given to him by his father. In later years it was this early interest in photography, as well as the recasting of North America's cultural and industrial landscape, that inspired his career.

In one of history's rare occurrences, the "civilizing" end of a frontier and the metamorphosis of a native people from dominant culture to "vanishing race" were recorded simultaneously through photographs.

Beginning his professional photography career in 1892 with the establishment of the Curtis & Guptill studio in Seattle, Edward spent more than 30 years photographing and recording the life-styles and traditions of the North American Indians.

Asahel made a name for himself during the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897, his photographs of stunning landscapes and everyday working life becoming the trademark of his 40-year career.

ALASKAN JOURNEYS

A Seattle paper wanted pictures of the Alaskan trails in the fall of 1897 so, as a cheechaco [Chinook jargon for someone new to the Pacific Northwest], I sailed north on the Rosalie in command of Capt. John A. Obrien in September. La Farge, the purser, proved my guardian angel, and he and Capt. Obrien showed me the mysteries of navigating the scantily marked channels of the Inland Passage. A storm drove the Rosalie out of Skagway to shelter in Pyramid Harbor a half hour after La Farge had taken me ashore in the first boat minus my camera. Goods were landed on lighters, to be grounded at high tide, horses to be dumped overboard to swim ashore. The wharf was for later arrivals.

Asahel Curtis for Alaska Sportsman, 1940

While Asahel had gone to work in his brother's studio two years prior, it was this trip to Alaska and the Klondike that established him as a professional photographer. Most accounts of Asahel's journey suggest that the brothers had developed an elaborate plan for what the December 18, 1897, issue of the Seattle Argus called a great effort to "go into the Alaska view business on the most gigantic scale ever attempted." The Curtis family rallied together, sending 24-year-old Asahel north with the required year's worth of supplies, as well as 3,000 glass plate negatives.

In the months it took to shuttle supplies from Skagway to the head of the Yukon River, Asahel roamed the Alaska and Yukon trails, recording the cold winter trials of the prospector's life. Photos depicting supply hauling, boat building, men at work on their claims, images captured on sheets of glass, were often sent home to miners' sweet- hearts and families as proof that they were still alive.

Although Asahel's account, written in hindsight, makes no reference to Edward and the studio's proposed view business, it does suggest the depth of the rift that separated the two brothers for their entire adult lives. In all, Asahel shot more than 1,500 photographs of Alaska and the Klondike, most of which were shipped south to be printed by Edward's studio. Yet nearly a year before Asahel was to return to Washington, in the spring of 1898, Edward published an article in the Century Illustrated Magazine entitled "The Rush to the Klondike Over the Mountain Passes." Photo credits were given to Edward, who never mentioned that Asahel was actually the one who had taken them. This episode became the root of a lifelong feud between the brothers, a conflict that remained unresolved even after Asahel regained ownership of the Alaska negatives.

In the early spring of 1899, Mr. Edward Harriman of New York, in cooperation with the Washington Academy of Sciences, but entirely at his own expense, organized an expedition to Alaska. He invited as his guests three artists and twenty-five men of science, representing various branches of research and including well-known professors in universities on both sides of the continent, and leaders in several branches of Government scientific work....

C. Hart Merriam, June 15, 1901

It happened that Edward and his assistant, while photographing on Mount Rainier, came to the rescue of three East Coast natural scientists who, while climbing Rainier, had missed their guideposts and become lost. Edward offered them a warm fire and later escorted them down the mountain. Grateful for the assistance, the three well-known scientists, Gifford Pinchot, conservationist and chief of the U. S. Division of Forestry; C. Hart Merriam, physician, naturalist, and chief of the U. S. Biological Survey; and George Bird Grinnell, editor of Forest & Stream magazine and a noted writer on the Plains Indians, spent an afternoon at Edward's studio, building friendships that would last for decades. Through this chance encounter Edward was granted the opportunity to join the Harriman Alaska Expedition, scheduled to depart Seattle in May 1899.

Edward Harriman, a railroad millionaire, had decided to expand his family vacation to include a full-fledged scientific expedition. He asked Merriam to coordinate the invitation of leading naturalists, geologists, paleontologists, botanists, zoologists and ethnologists. Artists and photographers were also to accompany these scientists, and Merriam asked Edward to join the expedition as lead photographer.

Aboard the George W. Elder the Harriman family, scientists and crew sailed from Seattle north up the Inland Passage, along the southern coast of the Alaskan Peninsula, then north to the Pribilof Islands and Cape Prince of Wales. A virtual "floating university," the expedition collected data on wildlife, natural resources and native cultures, with Harriman's primary goal being the assessment of a proposed trans-Alaska railroad route that would course through Alaska and, via tunnel or bridge, connect North America to Siberia. Aside from giving Edward his own taste of the Alaskan wilderness, the two-month expedition allowed him to assist and observe leading scientists as they made detailed reports on the environment and native culture. From this foundation, self-educated Edward developed techniques that played a critical role in the creation of his 20-volume work, *The North American Indian*.

SEPARATE ROADS

People's lives are marked by good fortune and bad, their perspectives changed by events and circumstances. After severing ties over the Alaska negatives, Asahel and Edward Curtis lived their entire adult lives in different worlds, albeit for much of the time in the same city. Not even their children knew one another. Edward married Clara Phillips in 1892 and had four children, Hal, Florence, Beth and Katherine. Asahel married Florence Carney in 1902 and also had four children, Walter, Asahel Jr., Betty and Polly.

There is little record of any exchange between Edward and Asahel. Like repelling magnets, their interests and bodies of work moved in opposite directions. Edward's aim during the peak of his photographic career was to document the American Indians' traditional way of life, something that had virtually disappeared when he began. Asahel was interested in process, the way things worked, and there was no better time in history to photograph industrial and agricultural advancements than during his lifetime.

Only a few daring individuals such as Edmond Meany, a history professor at the University of Washington, maintained friendships with both brothers. Meany climbed mountains with Asahel and visited Indian reservations with Edward. He understood that the brothers traveled separate roads, their personal interests and professional perspectives reflected in their photographic imagery .

EDWARD

I paid the princess a dollar for each picture I made. This seemed to please her greatly and with hands and jargon she indicated that she preferred to spend her time having pictures taken to digging clams.

Edward Curtis, c. 1950s

The inspiration to create a great documentary work on Native Americans came slowly to Edward, and a number of events led to its inception. At the 1898 National Photographic Convention Edward was awarded first place in the Genre Class for his Indian images and a diploma of excellence for his portraiture. The following year his images "Evening on the Sound," "The Mussel Gatherer," and "The Clamdigger," featuring Princess Angeline, the daughter of Chief Sealth, earned him another set of first place honors and semi-regular publication in the West Coast journal *Camera Craft* between 1899 and 1901.

His contact with C. Hart Merriam and George Bird Grinnell continued during this period as well, influencing the quality and scope of his work. Merriam had been charged with the direction of the publication effort relating to the Harriman Expedition 13 volumes of findings were published over the next 12 years, 2 for general public use and 11 scholarly works that became standard references in their fields. Additionally, a special souvenir album of Edward's photographs was commissioned by Harriman for the expedition members, production of which kept Edward in contact with Merriam throughout the summer of 1900. Merriam was a meticulous mentor when it came to print quality and recropping, demanding the best work Edward could supply.

At the invitation of Grinnell, Edward traveled to northern Montana during that same summer to observe the sun dance ceremony held by the Blood, Blackfeet and Piegan tribes. Edward later recalled the scene from his vantage point on the windswept plateau:

Neither house nor fence marred the landscape, and the broad, undulating prairie stretching away toward the Little Rockies, miles away to the west, was carpeted with tipis....It was the start of my concerned effort to learn about the Plains and to photograph their lives, and I was intensely affected.

Seven years after his trip to Montana Edward had embarked on what was to be a 33-year project in *The North American Indian*. As explained in Volume I, his aim in recording the descriptive material and photographs was "to form a comprehensive and permanent record of all the important tribes of the United States and Alaska that still retain to a considerable degree their primitive customs and traditions."

Funding for the project came through a critical sequence of events. Edward submitted a photograph of Marie Fischer to the *Ladies' Home Journal* for a contest seeking "the Prettiest Children in America." His photograph was chosen by the well-known portrait painter Walter Russell, who then came to Seattle to paint a portrait of Marie as one of 12 selected through the contest. Impressed with Edward's work, Russell later invited him to Oyster Bay, New York, to make photographic studies of President Theodore Roosevelt's sons as a foundation for portraits in oil.

Knowing that Roosevelt and Harriman were good friends (Harriman was one of Roosevelt's largest campaign contributors) and that the president took great interest in all things Western, Edward brought a set of Indian prints along to show him. A good acquaintanceship began, later resulting in a letter of support for Edward's work, dated December 16, 1905.

There is no man of great wealth with whom I am on sufficiently close terms to warrant my giving a special letter to him, but you are most welcome to use this letter in talking with any man who has any interest in the subject.

I regard the work you have done as one of the most valuable works which any American could now do .Your photographs stand by themselves, both in their wonderful artistic merit and in their value as historical

documents. You are now making a record of the lives of the Indians of our country which it would be the greatest misfortune, from the standpoint alike of the ethnologist and the historian, to leave unmade. You have begun just in time, for these people are at this very moment rapidly losing the distinctive traits and customs which they have slowly developed through the ages. The Indian, as an Indian, is on the point of perishing, and when he has become a United States citizen, though it will be a much better thing for him and for the rest of the country, he will lose completely his value as a living historical document.

This letter, coupled with good reviews from lectures at the Smithsonian Institution, the Bureau of American Ethnology and the National Geographic Society, as well as enthusiastic interest by the Morgan family, prompted Edward Curtis to request a meeting with wealthy financier James P. Morgan to discuss underwriting for the project. "No one can form an idea of the work until he has seen the pictures themselves," wrote Edward in his introductory letter, accompanied by an outline and plan for publishing all 20 volumes.

I feel that the work is worthwhile, and as a monumental thing nothing can exceed it. I have the ability, strength, and determination to finish the undertaking, but have gone to the end of my means and must ask someone to join me in the undertaking and make possible for all ages of Americans to see what the American Indian was like.

The January 24, 1906, meeting resulted in an agreement to provide Edward with \$15,000 a year for five years. In return, Morgan would receive 25 sets as well as 300 large photographic prints and 200 small ones. As support for the project had been difficult to come by the Smithsonian Institution and National Geographic Society were wary of investing in what they perceived as the work of an amateur ethnologist, this funding arrangement with the wealthiest man in America was a major coup.

In the year following his meeting with Morgan the first volume of *The North American Indian* was published. It included an introduction by Theodore Roosevelt and was edited by Frederick Webb Hodge of the Bureau of American Ethnology. Hodge's involvement with *The Handbook of the American Indians North of Mexico*, the bureau's major publication to date, lent valuable credibility to Edward's work and proved to be the bureau's only significant expression of support for the project.

"While primarily a photographer," Edward wrote in his introduction to *The North American Indian*, "I do not see or think photographically; hence the story of Indian life will not be told in microscopic detail, but rather will be presented as a broad and luminous picture." By this time Edward had lectured throughout the country and become known as an advocate for the American Indians. Beliefs developed through intensive field work and expressed in Volume I set the stage for future volumes:

Since the early days of Columbus the assertion has been made repeatedly that the Indian has no religion and no code of ethics, chiefly for the reason that in his primitive state he recognizes no supreme God. Yet the fact remains that no people have a more elaborate religious system than our aborigines, and none are more devout in the performance of the duties connected therewith.

Yet Edward's passion for his subject stemmed from the belief that Indians as an entire race were slated for extinction. In his introduction to the work Edward shares with his readers the words that may have swayed once unsure patrons, "When the last opportunity for study of the living tribe 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."

While awareness and appreciation of Edward's photography has grown in the last two decades, little mention is given to the comprehensive text that envelopes each volume's 75 photographic plates. When one

considers the numerous small units grouped under the common designation of "Yakima" or "Salishan Tribes of the Coast," the 20 volumes of *The North American Indian* encompass more than 100 different tribes. Northwest tribes such as the Yakima, Klickitat, Salishan, Nez Perce, Walla Walla, Umatilla, Chinookan, Quilliate and Willapa are described in volumes VII, VIII, and IX. These volumes were published in 1911 and 1913 and utilized much of the data and images Edward had collected during his early years of Indian photography.

Due to the large number of tribes dealt with in these volumes, Edward and his field team spent nearly all of 1909 completing extensive research. Particularly taken with the customs and beliefs of the Wishram as described in Volume VIII, Edward went to great lengths to gather stories and observe fishing techniques, proclaiming, "Considerable labor was involved in this research, as it required a detailed study of the entire stretch of river and the interviewing of every aged Indian to be found on its shores...;" Adding to that field research, Edward provided detailed accounts of the life-changing encounters between the Northwest Indians and the federal Department of the Interior, told from the Indians' point of view.

Shortly after the last volume of *The North American Indian* was published in 1930, both Edward and his lifework seemed to slip from public view. It is estimated that only 500 copies of *The North American Indian* were printed, and of that number, just 291 were marketed. For decades the work was virtually "lost" in that the size and elaborate nature of the 20-volume set caused it to be placed out of the public view in private collections and rare book rooms of larger repositories.

In Washington a handful of public repositories, including the Washington State Historical Society, the University of Washington, Washington State University, Tacoma Public Library, Seattle Public Library and Pacific Lutheran University, maintain complete sets of *The North American Indian*. Most of these sets are from the original 500; a few are reprint editions published by the Johnson Reprint Corporation during the 1970s. Aside from their dramatic sepia tone photographs, these volumes carry a wealth of information, each one living up to Edward's promise to "picture all features of the Indian way of life and environment "types of the young and the old, with their habitations, industries, ceremonies, games, and everyday customs."

Edward Curtis died in 1952, divorced, virtually unknown and with few resources, yet pleased to have accomplished his task. With this work he had not only faced physical and financial hardship, he faced the critiques of scholars who discredited his work as that of an untrained amateur. Today, after the "rediscovery" of *The North American Indian* during the 1970s, Edward's photographs inspire both awe and criticism. Some feel that he fought too obvious a battle with time, trading the everyday "westernized" clothing of his subjects for traditional costumes and idealized settings. Edward, like other ethnologists of the time, was unconcerned with acculturation and went to great lengths to avoid evidence of reservation life and the imposition of western culture and religion on the North American Indians portrayed in his photographs. Yet the fact remains that Edward Curtis photographed American Indians as individuals during a time when our country was trying to confine and forget its native people.

ASAHLEL

...Watching the throngs constantly changing. What better could his chance be than that of the thousands who are before him. Seemingly every degree of social scale has its representative. Every possible kind of garb is to be seen....

The look of abstraction and gloom in many a face is heartrending. The probable cause is the same in many cases; a mortgaged home or a farm or a business that passed into other hands that the great Eldorado could be reached. These fair hills far away between which streams whose beds were pebbles of gold have faded. Weeks and months of hard work coupled with...poor food have left the system weakening....

Asahel Curtis, Dawson Diary, 1899

Asahel Curtis was a keen observer of people, place and process. More modest in manner than his older brother, Asahel concentrated his professional and personal life on the Northwest. After leaving the Curtis & Guptill Studio upon his return from the Klondike in 1899, Asahel worked as a newspaper photographer for the Seattle Times and Post-Intelligencer.

Shortly thereafter, in 1901, Asahel established his own studio in partnership with W. P. Romans. As his photographic skill and interests in the out-of-doors and Northwest industries grew, Asahel's photos of Washington's scenery and abundant natural resources earned him a reputation as both a documentor of time-marking events and a booster of statewide industry and tourism.

Asahel's images of Northwest railroads, logging, fishing, agriculture, the Denny Hill re-grades in Seattle, and the damming of the Columbia River mark events that changed Washington forever. These were the subjects he was often hired by companies and individuals to document. The photographs born of his own interest were of mountains, parks and outdoor expeditions.

An avid mountain climber, Asahel assisted with the formation of the Mountaineers (an offshoot of the Portland-based Mazamas), a group of outdoor enthusiasts dedicated to organizing outings to Washington's mountains. By 1912 Asahel had helped lead climbing expeditions to Mounts Baker, Rainier and Olympus. Asahel's written and photographic accounts of these outings were published in The Mountaineer annuals and describe in detail the rigors of some of the first mass ascents of Northwest peaks.

With the establishment of its national park in 1899, Mount Rainier became a favorite of Asahel's for climbing and photographing. He served on the park's advisory board from 1911 to 1936 and campaigned extensively for access roads into the park. "I realize the true Mountaineer would much rather see the mountains from the trail or the unexplored wilderness," wrote Asahel ("The Future of Rainier National Park," The Mountaineer, 1911), "but to make mountains at all popular, to get the majority of people into them, it is necessary to have roads."

As part of his Rainier roads campaign, Asahel developed a lecture and slide show that described the system of trails being developed and suggested automobile routes. Yet within his description of the new 207,360-acre "national playground," he shared with his audience his love of the natural landscape:

One comes more intimately in touch with the mountains when he travels the trails. In the valleys the forests seem lower, the giant trees rise from one's side to tremendous heights and the lower growth reaches out a friendly hand to bid you welcome ; but it is on the untrodden mountain heights that the traveler receives a true reward for his toil. Here where vegetation makes its last stand amid a world of ice and snow, with the lower world stretching away to the horizon, nature unfolds in all her beauty.

The objective of Asahel's lecture and lobbying was to increase accessibility to the park and, as a result, heighten public sensitivity to the importance of environmental conservation. But he had no desire to expand the parks, as was proposed in later years, and in fact lobbied against expansion as well as the establishment of North Cascades National Park. In a letter dated November 13, 1939, to Mr. W. G. Oves of the Spokane Chamber of Commerce, his reasons are clear:

I am opposed to any new National Parks or any additions to the present ones. By subjects , here are the reasons:

Recreation: We now have, under the Forest Service, full use of the mountains for recreation; all too often the cost within a park is much higher.

Water: The cities and communities on both sides of the range need water for domestic and industrial use as well as irrigation. Water cannot be impounded in a National Park, except by special act of Congress, difficult to get.

Mining: No mining is permitted in a National Park. We believe that there are mineral resources in the Cascades.

Livestock: No grazing is permitted in a National Park. The livestock industry makes valuable use of the lands in the National Forests, and under the Forest Service regulations the range is not over-grazed. Forests: There are vast forests within this area upon which the lumber industry must depend while reforested lands are growing. There are no figures for the whole area, but in Whatcom County (of which the proposed park includes 66% of the county) this is nine billion feet. The counties having National Forests are concerned on this point as they receive 25% of the gross revenues of the Forests. Labor is vitally concerned, for in the Olympics they lost the opportunity to earn \$95,500,000 in wages for harvesting the forest crop on the extra lands included in the Olympic Park. We believe in the multiple use of the forests for all the purposes listed above and for others. These uses do not conflict. The State already has two large National Parks. There is no money available to make them accessible, in fact the plan is that they are to remain primitive. Unless made accessible there can be no considerable tourist revenues to offset the great loss through locking up all the other resources.

Asahel's concern for the future of Washington's National Parks and Forests went much further than dollars and cents. He had great reverence for the natural landscape, but when it came to weighing the well-being of working people with the expansion of a "play-ground," the scales weighed in the peoples' favor. His compassion is evident in a February 26, 1940, letter to Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg:

Our state has had a National Park, the Olympic, carved out of it. A part of this area could well be so used, but there was added to it a large area not suited for a park (so reported by the Park Service). The loss of this area to the state means a loss to labor alone of more than \$100,000,000, and many of the men who would be glad to work there are on relief. This was bad enough, but now the Park Service is driving the settlers off adjacent lands with threats of condemnation of their [property]....It is a modern Acadia needing only a Longfellow to shock the world with its brutality.

Although Asahel failed to win the battle against the expansion and new designation of Washington's national parks, his voice as a road and trail builder was one history heard. Throughout his tenure on the park board and during his service as president of the Washington State Good Roads Association from 1932 to 1933, Asahel often punctuated letters to senators, chambers of commerce, and government officials with photographs to the advantage of the cause. "You are certainly most generous with your pictures and I thank you very much for the best ones I have yet seen of views on the south side of the park," wrote O. A. Tomlinson, superintendent of Mount Rainier National Park. "We have already made plans for including the trail you suggest in our next year's program." The roads and trails allowing access to Mount Rainier National Park are still credited largely to the efforts of Asahel Curtis and the Good Roads Association.

While photographs of Mount Rainier comprise a large portion of his work, Asahel created a multitude of photographic "sets." Maintaining copyrights and detailed business records, Asahel often named these sets for the companies and individuals who hired him. The Harney State Set, including some 40 images of a traditional Makah whale hunt, was actually a collection of photographs shot for Artwork of Seattle and Western Washington, a nine-part photo book published by W. D. Harney of Racine, Wisconsin.

Harney, a photogravure publisher, had engaged Asahel to photograph a number of western Washington scenes. As a result, Asahel shot nearly 200 photographs ranging from Willapa to Everett, Mount Constance to Cape Flattery. In the midst of these landscape images fell one photograph of Harney, the crew of the Edith after a wreck at Neah Bay, and the photographs of the Makahs.

In all, the 1910 published work, actually one of Harney's many multi-part art portfolios, including State of Washington and Eastern Washington & Western Idaho, featured 80 of Asahel's photographs. Most are stunning scenics; the Makahs are unforgettable.

Printed in sepia, the Makah images record one of the last grey whale hunts at Neah Bay a whaling canoe under sail, many hands pulling the whale to shore, women waiting with carrying baskets ready, children watching. From sea to land, Asahel documented a fading tradition that had flourished among the ancestors of the Makahs and their northern neighbors for centuries.

Photographing the people and sights of Neah Bay just as he found them, Asahel created a compelling portrait of the Makah people during the early reservation years, a time of transition. Through his lens we see the penetration of western culture in clothing, housing and life-style contrasted by a deeper set of Makah traditions and skills as seen in whale hunting and basket making.

In addition to the Harney State Set, compilations of photographs taken for chambers of commerce and railroads can also be found in Asahel's body of work. Like a handful of other Northwest photographers who recognized that there was a sizeable market for photos depicting the Northwest's beauty and abundance, Asahel photographed natural areas, orchards, wheat fields, logging camps, shipyards, and fisheries. Although few documents exist describing his thoughts on photography or his plans for photo shoots, the 12 boxes of correspondence in the University of Washington's Special Collections are primarily related to his parks and road-building efforts, a handful of letters allow glimpses into his rigorous schedule.

On April 17, 1928, Asahel wrote to Mr. F. O. Hagie, secretary of the Yakima Chamber of Commerce:

I plan at the present time to be in the Valley when the apples are in bloom probably going down through the Valley one day. I want to make at least a dozen negatives of the country around Yakima. I would appreciate it very much if you would let me know how the blossoms are coming on.

In August 1929 an invitation arrived at Asahel's studio from A. L. Eidemiller, advertising agent for the Chicago Milwaukee St. Paul & Pacific Railroad:

Since our change in schedule on The Olympian a short time ago, we have the opportunity of offering our passengers a daylight ride through some of the most scenic parts of the Bitter Root Mountains. Could you undertake to...make us a series of photographs?

In time, after the formation and dissolution of partnerships, first with William P. Romans and later with Walter P. Miller, Asahel established his own photography studio in 1920. With the help of his sister Eva, his wife Florence, his daughter Betty, and a crew of colorists and developers to assist with large-scale projects, he continued the scenic and industrial photography for which he had become known. Among his many clients were the Puget Sound Navigation Company, the Spokane Chamber of Commerce and National Geographic magazine, in whose February 1933 issue a number of his black and white and experimental color photos appeared.

While Asahel created some 60,000 images throughout the course of his career; the nature of his work was more practical than artistic, more likely to be ranked among commercial photographers such as F. Jay Haynes or Lewis Hine than the "art class" of photographers such as Ansel Adams, Imogene Cunningham, or even his brother Edward. Nor did he consider himself an artist. "He liked to think of himself as a shrewd businessman," says Polly Curtis Kella, the youngest of Asahel and Florence Curtis's four children. "But I think he was just the opposite. Dad didn't permit himself to think of himself as an artist, but artist he was."

Asahel died of heart failure on March 7, 1941, working until his last day. In memoriam, E. J. Fenby, acting supervisor of the Snoqualmie National Forest, wrote to Asahel Curtis, Jr., on June 9, 1942.

Surely, nothing better can be said of a man than that he loved nature, the wild and beautiful things of his surroundings. Your father's work and ideals were so outstanding that the United States Forest Service desires to honor his memory by dedicating a grove of virgin native trees as the "Asahel Curtis Forest Camp." This camp is located on the banks of the South Fork of the Snoqualmie River where the Sunset Highway crosses it for the last time in its ascent to the summit of the Cascade Range.

A year later the main body of Asahel's work, some 30,000 negatives and 40,000 prints, was purchased by the Washington State Historical Society and now comprises the Asahel Curtis Collection. The collection's print count includes studio albums, leather-bound annotated photo albums, black and white hand-tinted originals from the Curtis studio, and reference prints made by the Society. Additionally, some 20,000 copy negatives have been made as most of Asahel's original negatives were made on fragile glass plates and unstable nitrate film.

For 40 years Asahel documented change and growth in the Northwest. His photographs appeared in books, magazines, promotional pamphlets and advertisements. In more recent years they have been used to illustrate typical scenes of early Northwest industry, and they appear in almost every issue of this magazine. They are clear and true-to-the-moment photographs, largely valued for their historical accuracy.

Aside from his images, we have little material, such as journals and personal letters, with which to build a picture of Asahel's character. The most telling clues we have are perhaps his most memorable photos, the symmetry of Mount Rainier reflected in an alpine lake, a miner playing Solitaire in a shaft of sunlight, a young girl and a big fish, or a couple sitting on top of a mountain, "Lost to the World." These and the rest of Asahel's photographs reveal the soul of the man behind the camera while at the same time documenting life in the Pacific Northwest as he encountered it.

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