

*Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher: The Epic Life and Immortal Photographs of Edward Curtis*, by Timothy Egan

Two events changed Edward Curtis's life, sending him toward monumental achievement and personal ruin. In 1896, a successful portrait photographer in Seattle, Curtis persuaded "Princess Angeline," 80 year old last surviving child of Chief Seattle, to sit for a portrait. The result was a haunting, very moving portrait of Angeline, who was then scraping out a living on the edge of Seattle. In the summer of 1900, Curtis photographed villagers of the Blackfeet Nation and their lives. Then he formed the ambition to record photographically all the Indian communities remaining in North America "to capture the essence of their lives before that essence disappeared."

The effort took him 30 years and from comparative riches to rags. At the beginning he was a successful photographer and businessman with some social prominence and a well known mountain climber. Along the way he became an admired acquaintance of Teddy Roosevelt and, after meeting J. P. Morgan, was able to obtain funding from him. During his project, Curtis spent months living close to the tribes he was recording. He spent months away from his family, risked his life, and destroyed his marriage. In 1952 at the age of 84, he died a poor man. But in his finished volumes, he left 40,000 photographs, descriptions and transcriptions of unnumbered myths and rituals, the glossaries of 75 languages. He left us a legacy whose value the experts are now beginning to realize.

Timothy Egan, whose *The Worst Hard Times* about the Dust Bowl years, writes well, tells this fascinating story with style.

Several websites contain images of Curtis's best known images. Just Google the name of this book and you'll have several to choose from. I want to see the 20 volume set itself. My first attempt will be at the library of the University of Washington