

NEWS RELEASE

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FRED JONES JR. MUSEUM OF ART
UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA - NORMAN
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

WITH IMAGE

Curtis Exhibition Unveils 1920s Native Oklahoman Photos

NORMAN, OKLA. – Thirty years after photographer Edward S. Curtis began his epic mission to research and photograph Western American Indian tribes, the ambitious journalist landed in Oklahoma. Visitors to the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art March 28 to May 17 will see how photos from his 1926 excursion reveal an authentic look at Native Oklahomans.

Gathering Fragments: Edward S. Curtis in Oklahoma unveils 75 photos of multiple tribes, including the Comanche, Cheyenne, Otoe and Wichita. An opening reception begins at 6 p.m. Friday, March 27, with guest lectures by curators Byron Price, Charles Marion Russell Memorial Chair at the University of Oklahoma School of Art, and Mark White, Eugene B. Adkins Curator.

Although the Seattle, Wash., photographer's lifework culminated in *The North American Indian*, an impressive 20-part series begun in 1907 and completed 23 years later, *Gathering Fragments* focuses specifically on Curtis's works in Oklahoma.

"This is the first museum exhibition of Edward S. Curtis's Oklahoma photographs as a group and the first opportunity to consider their meaning and importance to Oklahomans past and present," Price said.

In 1898, Curtis had undertaken an ambitious mission to photograph and research as many western American Indian tribes as possible. President Theodore Roosevelt eventually became interested in the photographer's work and introduced Curtis to New York banking tycoon J. Pierpont Morgan who, in 1906, offered to underwrite fieldwork for the project for five years at the rate of \$15,000 a year.

Curtis, in turn, agreed to finance the cost of publishing a serialized edition of 500 copies. A separate portfolio containing between 35 and 40 large photogravures would accompany each of the generously illustrated volumes of text.

“This exhibition surveys an interesting but frequently overlooked volume in Curtis’ *The North American Indian*,” said White. “Curtis was uncomfortable with the assimilation he found in many of the Oklahoma tribes, so he attempted to recreate images of 19th-century Native culture.”

The 111 images of Oklahoma Indians reproduced as photogravures in volume 19 of *The North American Indian* and its accompanying portfolio included an interesting amalgam of tribes, ceremonies, lifeways and material culture. More than 75 percent of the portfolio images and almost half of the illustrations in the associated volume consist of individual poses.

Many such shots were expressive portraits designed to evoke the inner character of each sitter. Two photographs of bison herds leisurely grazing the Wichita Mountain Wildlife Refuge near Lawton, Okla., helped provide a historical and cultural context for the Plains tribes, as did the volume’s frontispiece, a haunting image of the placid Washita River, scene of the infamous massacre of Black Kettle’s Southern Cheyenne band by the U.S. Army in 1868.

Despite Morgan’s help and additional funds raised on the lecture circuit and through his Seattle studio, Curtis found himself chronically strapped for cash to keep his project going. Selling the expensive series also proved difficult and, in the end, *The North American Indian* only attracted 280 subscribers. Eventually, Curtis was forced to declare bankruptcy and give up the publication rights to much of his work to creditors. His marriage suffered as well and ended in a bitter divorce.

Yet there were rewards. Three decades of effort yielded some 40,000 photographic negatives, 10,000 sound recordings, reams of written notes and valuable motion picture footage documenting more than 80 Western and Alaskan tribes.

The museum is located in the OU Arts District on the corner of Elm Avenue and Boyd Street, at 555 Elm Ave., on the OU Norman campus.

Admission to the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art is free to all OU students with a current student ID and all museum association members, \$5 for adults, \$4 for seniors, \$3 for children 6 to 17 years of age, \$2 for OU faculty/staff, and free for children 5 and under. Admission is free on Tuesdays. The museum’s Web site is www.ou.edu/fjjma. Information and accommodations on the basis of disability are available by calling (405) 325-4938.

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IMAGE CUTLINE

Images of late 1920s Native Oklahomans come to life during an opening reception Friday, March 27 when the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art premieres *Gathering Fragments: Edward S. Curtis in Oklahoma*. Curtis's photogravures, such as *A Comanche Girl*, were included in his 20-volume 1930 publication, *The North American Indian*. The exhibition remains on display through May 17.