

Milestone Film & Video presents:
Edward S. Curtis'
A Drama of Kwakiutl Life in the Northwest

IN THE LAND OF THE WAR CANOES

A Milestone Film Release
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Credits

Original title: IN THE LAND OF THE HEADHUNTERS: A Drama of Primitive Life on the Shores of the North Pacific. 1914. USA and Canada. Produced by the Seattle Film Company. Distributed by the World Film Corporation. Story written and picture made by Edward S. Curtis. Camera: Edmund August Schwinke. Interpreter and Research: George Hunt. Period: First Exploration of the North Pacific Coast. Cost: \$75,000. 6 reels. Black and White. New York premiere: December 7, 1914 at the Casino Theater (Broadway & 39th). 1972 restoration by Bill Holm, George Quimby and David Gerth. Music performed by the Kwakiutl tribes. ©1972 University of Washington Press.

Cast

Stanley Hunt Motana
Paddy Maleed Kenada
Bulóotsa Waket
Margaret Wilson Frank
Sarah Smith Martin
Mrs. George Walkus Naida
Kwa'Kwaano The Sorcerer
Bulóotsa Yaklus

Synopsis

(from the original 1914 program)

To gain power from the spirit forces, Motana, the son of a great chief, goes on a vigil journey. Through the fasting and hardships of the vigil he hopes to gain supernatural strength which will make him a chief not less powerful than his father, Kenada.

First upon a mountain's peak he builds a prayer-fire to the Gods. After long dancing about the sacred flames he drops from exhaustion, and in vision-sleep the face of a maid appears in the coiling smoke; thus breaking the divine law which forbids the thought of women during the fasting.

Now he must pass another stronger ordeal. Leaving his desecrated fire to go to the Island of the Dead he meets Naida, the maid of his dream and woos her. She tells him she is promised to the hideous Sorcerer. Motana bids the maid return to her father and say that when this vigil is over he will come with a wealth of presents and beg her hand in marriage. Now he renews his quest of spirit power and tests his courage by spending the night in the fearful "house of skulls." And to prove his prowess he goes in quest of sea-lions and then performs the greatest feat of all — the capture of a whale.

Then, for his final invocation to the Gods, Motana again builds his sacred fire upon the heights. While he fasts and dances there about his sacred fire the Sorcerer, in a dark glade of the forest, has gathered about him fellow workers in evil magic and they sing "short life songs" to destroy him. The Sorcerer sends his daughter to find Motana and in some way get a lock of his hair, that they may destroy his life by incantation. This plotting woman, however, on seeing Motana asleep by his fire becomes infatuated with him and decides to risk even the wrath of her Sorcerer father and win the love of

Motana. When she awakens him with caressing words, he bids her begone, as he is not thinking of women, but of the spirits. With angry threats she departs, but in stealth watches the faster until he drops asleep, then creeping up steals his necklace and a lock of hair, and disappears.

Motana, returning, asks his father to send messengers demanding the hand on Naida. Her father, Waket, replies to the messengers: "My daughter is promised to the fearful Sorcerer of Yilis. We dread his evil magic. We also fear Yaklus, the head hunter, the brother of the Sorcerer. The Sorcerer is proof against knife and spear and arrow. Yaklus and his clan know no conqueror."

The followers of Motana and Kenada prove that the power of the Sorcerer cannot avail against the wrath of the raven-clan, who are determined to rid the region of the head hunters. The head of the Sorcerer they bring, to prove his death. But unknown to them, Yaklus, the head-hunting chief, has escaped. In great pomp of primitive pageantry Naida and Motana are married. Yet even while the wedding dancers make merry, a cloud of tragedy hangs above them, for Yaklus and the survivors of his village are athirst for vengeance. Enraged at the death of his brother, the Sorcerer, he runs "pahu-paku," and it is really Yaklus, "the short life bringer."

In his magnificent high-prowed canoes he starts upon his war of vengeance. It is his law that the war party destroy all who are met, whether friend or foe. While on their foray fishing parties and travelers are encountered.

Then they make their night attack upon the village of Motana. Kenada and his tribesmen give way before the infuriated Yaklus, and amid the smoke and flames of the burning village Motana is wounded and Naida is carried away to captivity.

Yaklus, returning to his village, gives a great dance of victory. The frenzied warriors demand the life of Naida. Yaklus bids her come and dance for them. If she dances well enough to please him he will spare her life. If not, they will throw her to the "hungry wolves." So well does she dance that Yaklus spares her.

In the sleeping hours Naida sends her fellow captive slave with a token and message to Motana, who has been revived by surviving medicine men of his village. When he receives the message from his bride-wife Motana calls for volunteers.

By stealth he rescues her. Yaklus in rage starts in pursuit. Motana, hard pressed, dares the waters of the surging gorge of Hyal through which he passes in safety. Great was his "water magic." Yaklus attempts to follow but the raging waters of the gorge sweep upon him and he and his grizzly followers become the prey of the evil ones of the sea.

Background

Edward S. Curtis is one of the most highly regarded photographers of Native Americans. His photographs, made in the first three decades of this century, evoke the majesty of their subjects along with a sense of innocence and loss. In the 1970s the brilliant work of Teri C. McLuhan and other researchers revived interest in Curtis and his popularity increases with each year. Today, his photographs sell for record prices and museums continuously mount exhibitions of his work .

Recently has Curtis' only motion picture of his beloved Indians come to light. Basing his screenplay on a tribal tale, Curtis sought to document the pre-Columbian culture of the Kwakiutl people of the Pacific Northwest. In 1972, the film was lovingly restored by Bill Holm, George Quimby and David Gerth with a soundtrack of songs and dialogue by the Kwakiutls. Although the original material had suffered some nitrate damage over the years, the film is an artistic triumph by one this country's finest photographers, and an invaluable ethnographic record of a vanished culture. The war canoes and totems, built by the Kwakiutls for the film, represent some of the last great work of their traditional art. Today, some of these pieces are now in major museums around the country including the Thomas Burke Memorial Museum in Seattle and the Vancouver Museum of Anthropology.

Edward Sheriff Curtis (1868-1952)

The early life of Edward S. Curtis showed little evidence that he would become one of the most important ethnographers of Native Americans. Curtis was born on February 19, 1868 in Madison, Wisconsin and moved with his family twenty years later to the Washington territory. By the early 1890s, he was an established professional portrait photographer in Seattle. Pursuing his own interests, Curtis began photographing Indians living in the area. He recognized that their way of life was vanishing along with those members who remembered the past. Curtis was determined that this culture and way of life would not pass without being documented. He wanted to record “every phase of Indian life of all tribes yet, in a primitive condition, taking up the type, male and female, child and adult, their home structure, their environment, their handicraft, games, ceremonies, etc.” Armed with his photographs of the Mojave, Zuni and Apache Indians of the Southwest, along with a testimonial letter from President Theodore Roosevelt (who had been so impressed by his work that he hired Curtis to photograph the wedding of his daughter Alice), Curtis approached a man who could afford to finance his plan. His January 1906 meeting with J.P. Morgan was a complete success. Morgan agreed to provide \$75,000 in financial support over five years for Curtis’ project. The Curtis Studio had much to offer. Two of his assistants at the time were famed photographers Adolph F. Muhr and Imogen Cunningham.

The project took much longer than planned, but by the conclusion of Curtis’ work in 1930, he had completed his forty-volume *The North American Indian*, consisting of twenty volumes of ethnographic documentation and twenty volumes of photoengravings of Curtis’ original photographs. During the thirty-year project, he had taken over 80,000 photographs of over 80 Indian tribes. The New York Herald called his work “the most gigantic undertaking in the making of books since the King James edition of the Bible.”

The Production of the Film

In 1911, as part of his massive undertaking, Curtis travelled to Vancouver Island, British Columbia, to visit the Kwakiutls. By the next year, needing money for his project and to add to his research and still photography work, Curtis decided that the best way to record the traditional way of life and ceremonies of the Kwakiutl people was to make one of the first feature motion pictures. Curtis had already shot footage in 1906 of the Hopi Snake dance, which he had previously showed during his talks, but this was to be on a grander scale. On March 28, 1912, Curtis wrote in a letter to Frederick Webb Hodge: “I am still doing some figuring on the possibility of a series of motion pictures, and am very much in hopes that it will materialize, as such an arrangement would materially strengthen the real cause [his books].” In his promotional letters to raise money for the series, he estimated the profits would be \$25,000 to \$100,000 a year. This was simply not to be. It took three years of preparation for this one film including the weaving of the costumes; building of the war canoes, housefronts, poles; and the carving of masks. Assisting on the film was George Hunt, a Kwakiutl who had served as an interpreter for the famous anthropologist Franz Boas nearly twenty years before. Hunt helped contribute substantial portions of the film’s story as well.

Originally titled “In the Days of Vancouver,” the detailed scenario for those days of early cinema was elaborate. Curtis had already decided that the film could not be a simple documentary record. It would have to be a story that reflected the rich dramatic character of the people. IN THE LAND OF THE HEAD-HUNTERS was shot on Deer Island on a protected beachfront. Curtis also sailed to Devil Rock to film the sea lions for the movie. It is a magnificent shot of hundreds of bulls diving off the rocks into the ocean in a long line. Curtis and his assistant had been left at the island overnight by their boat since they had been assured by government charts that the island was forty feet above the high-tide mark. When they explored the island, they found to their horror that their was not a piece of driftwood. This meant only one thing — the charts were wrong. The packed all their equipment in watertight bags and moved to the high point of the island. During the night, they could not sleep, knowing that they might not live through the day. At dawn, the high tide swept in and flooded over them. For hours, they hung on to their rigged lifelines, barely surviving until the boat returned. Curtis later wrote, “To this day, I cannot read about a human being sentenced to death without recalling that moment on Devil Rock.” A problem Curtis had throughout the film was the casting of Naida, the

female love interest. As filming went on, the actresses' relatives disapproved of their participation and thus there are three women credited in the role. The film, released in December 1914 under the title *IN THE LAND OF THE HEAD HUNTERS*, received rave reviews from the critics on its New York premiere.

Stephen Bush, one of the first great film critics, wrote in *Moving Picture World*, that the film was "remarkable," stating that as "a gem of the motion picture art it has never been surpassed ... Mr. Curtis has found the short cut of genius and he eminently succeeds where others have dismally failed." In April 1915, Curtis met Robert and Frances Flaherty and gave them a special screening of *IN THE LAND OF THE HEAD-HUNTERS*. Flaherty, who had already tried and failed to film the Baffin Island Eskimos two years before, was strongly influenced by the film and six years later he recorded his own masterpiece on Native American culture, *NANOOK OF THE NORTH*. In their romanticism and desire to film native culture before the onslaught of western civilization, Flaherty and Curtis shared much the same sensibility.

But like many independent films today, Curtis' masterpiece was over budget and the distributor, The World Film Corporation was underfunded. The film was only shown in Seattle and New York. So *IN THE LAND OF THE HEAD HUNTERS* quickly vanished and was completely forgotten, leaving *NANOOK OF THE NORTH* to be considered the first milestone in documentary history. But in 1947, a 35mm nitrate print was discovered at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History. In 1924, the American Museum of Natural History in New York had purchased the negative and print from Curtis (then working in Los Angeles as a stills photographer for Cecil B. DeMille), but somehow a print wound up with film collector Hugo Zeiter of Danville Illinois who donated his print to the Field Museum. There, the film was copied to safety stock, but nothing came of plans to incorporate parts of the movie into exhibits on Northwest Coast Indians. The film continued to languish unseen. In 1952, Curtis died in obscurity, his forty-volume masterwork hidden in rare-book sections of libraries.

Bill Holm, an expert on Kwakiutl culture at University of Washington's Burke Museum, had heard about the film from members of the tribe who had acted in the film. He began searching for it and on a visit to the Field Museum in 1962, he discovered its existence through a curator there, George Irving Quimby. Three years later, Quimby came to the Anthropology Department of the University of Washington and took copies of the film with him. In the summer of 1967, Holm and his family visited the towns on Vancouver Island where the film was shot, showing the film to the people who had participated in the original production over fifty years before. As the film was silent, the Kwakiutls talked and sang in their native tongue during the presentation. This inspired Holm to have them help in the restoration of the film.

The Restoration

Sound engineer David Gerth travelled with Holm to Vancouver Island to record spontaneous dialogue and songs of the Kwakiutl residents. To provide appropriate authentic sound effects of the war canoes, Gerth and Holm used a thirty-five-foot model, similar to those used in the film. The new soundtrack was meticulously matched to the film and adds an extra dimension of authenticity. The restoration process of the film included adjusting the projection speed to meet modern standards. Some of the intertitles were redone, and an introduction was added. The name of the new version was changed to *IN THE LAND OF THE WAR CANOES* when the Kwakiutls objected to Curtis' original title. When Milestone acquired the home video rights to the film, a brand-new 1-inch video master was made at Alpha Cine Labs in Seattle using the original restoration negative using the latest technology.

This 1972 restoration stands on its own as a fascinating document of a way of life long vanished, and as a missing piece in the career of one of America's most respected photographers of Native Americans.

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Film notes by David Pierce and Dennis Doros.

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