



The Myth of the Vanishing Race

By David R.M. Beck

Associate Professor, Native American Studies, University of Montana

February, 2001

By the early 20th century, when Edward Curtis began the work on what came to be the twenty-volume publication featured on this website, American Indian nations and people were largely viewed by scholars, government officials and the public at large as a vanishing race. This belief was buttressed by two scholarly theories: 1) the view that America's continental "Manifest Destiny" was successfully completed in geographic terms, that the "frontier" had been closed by Euro-American expansion into every part of this nation; and 2) Social Darwinism, which posited that cultures battled with each other in an evolutionary contest in which one was destined to triumph and the other to fade into extinction. This theory dovetailed both with demographic evidence, embodied in a precipitous drop in Native populations, and with the federal policy of forced assimilation, which even most supporters of Indian people believed to be the only hope for Indian survival in the new century. In popular terms, these views were reinforced in wild west shows, world fairs, art, literature and a variety of other venues, all of which helped lay the foundations for the American public's long-standing misinterpretation of American Indians.

By Curtis's time American Indians had endured a highly destructive, centuries-long assault on their homelands, their societies, and their cultures in physical, spiritual, and emotional terms. Under the guise first of religion and then science, Euro-American invaders had stripped the indigenous communities of this continent of nearly all of their land and resources, and carried forth an all-out attack on their languages, religions, educational systems, family structures, and systems of governance. For centuries missionaries, soldiers and government officials led this assault. By Curtis's time, humanitarian reformers, social and physical scientists, and artists lent their authority to these efforts as well.



[Vanishing race - Navaho](#)

Rapid population decline followed, and sometimes preceded, Euro-American invaders, caused not only by warfare and capture for slavery, but by diseases which Europeans had brought to this continent. The combination of violence and disease caused some tribal communities to lose as much as ninety percent of their member populations. As wave after wave of disease hit at times of early contact, communities might lose a quarter to a third of their populations time and again. This type of population loss continued well into the nineteenth century, as western tribes had first contact with Euro-Americans, and as eastern tribes were forced one after another to remove from their homelands to west of the Mississippi, with conditions weakening old and young alike, making them more susceptible to starvation and disease. All in all, a land that may well have held seven to ten million American Indians at the time of Columbus's arrival contained approximately a quarter of a million by 1900.

Policy of Forced Assimilation

This rapid decline, together with the advance of white America into all territories of the United States, suggested to government officials and reformers alike that Indian societies were quickly disappearing from the American landscape and that Indians themselves would soon disappear from the American milieu. Under the guise of Richard Henry Pratt's famous dictum to "kill the Indian and save the man" the federal government, through an aggressive policy of forced assimilation, attempted to destroy Indian cultures and arts, tribal societies and governments, and Native religions and families in order to "help" Indians join what was at the time believed to be the melting pot of American culture and society. Between the late 1880s and the mid 1930s this philosophy and effort formed the central basis of federal Indian policy. Under this policy, communal land holdings were individualized and tribal governments were systematically undercut.

The all-out assault on Indian communities was accomplished in part by taking children from their families and placing them in schools, on and off reservations, where they were forced to lose their own languages and learn the English language and American customs and manners. This was coupled with an attempt to turn Indians into farmers--both among tribes that had never farmed and held unfarmable land, and those that had farmed for centuries, but had been pushed onto unfarmable land. The United States attempted to force Indians to take up farming when the resources they held made the accomplishment of that goal all but impossible.

The contradiction of federal policy was problematic on another level as well. The insidious nature of racism in America worked to ensure that even those American Indians who succeeded in white terms--giving up their connections to their homelands and communities, and learning trades and professions in the American educational systems--were frozen out of the larger American society on the basis of skin color and perceptions of lack of intelligence, and forced to the fringes. Indians who stayed on reservations were largely believed by the dominant society to be representatives of a rapidly passing way of life, while those who left the reservations became largely invisible in American society.

Nostalgia for an "Almost Extinct Civilization"

All of this fed into a nostalgic market in American culture that was adapted into popular

entertainment systems. Although Indians had been used as display curiosities and non-Indians had "played" at being Indian for a long time before this period, both of these activities flowered in the decades that coincided with the federal policy of forced assimilation as the belief grew stronger that Indians were disappearing forever from American society.

Wild west shows portraying re-enactments of the recent wars on the plains, with Indians in full regalia galloping against the Cavalry, reinforced the notion that tribal cultures were more part of America's past than its present. Boy Scouts, the YMCA through its Indian Guides program, and schools through their use of Indians as mascots helped mythologize Indians as part of history rather than portray them as participating in current events. And highly attended encampments at world's fairs and other events drove the point home as well.

At the 1893 Columbian World's Exposition held in Chicago, for example, an Indian village set up on the Midway was meant to remind visitors of times past rather than times future. One guidebook to the fair refers to "the aborigines of this country" as an "almost extinct civilization, if civilization it is to be called." There was no question to the writers of this guidebook that Indians were a dying race. The book urged visitors to see the Indian exhibit, warning that "it is more than probable that the World's Columbian exposition will furnish the last opportunity for an acquaintance with the 'noble red-man' before he achieves annihilation, or at least loss of identity."¹ Ironically, this provided employment for Indians who had been forced to abandon the life style being portrayed.

The country's great natural history museums were established or began to flourish during this period as well. Ethnologists, in the belief that a finite amount of tribal material culture existed, raced each other across the country to build collections of Indian artifacts. Indian displays were placed in "natural" settings in many of these museums, in which Indians were to provide the third leg of a triad--wild plants, wild animals and "wild" people. These displays left observers with the dual perception that Indians were a part of the natural world, that they were somehow "exotic," and that they were becoming extinct. Models or mannequins of Indians were created for these displays, sometimes using face castings of real people. Occasionally Indian people themselves were brought into museums and put on display. The displays themselves reinforced the notion that Indians were no longer a part of American society. Often housed down the hallway from displays of extinct fauna, such as dinosaurs, a number of these showcases have remained relatively intact in museums across the U.S. even into the 21st century.

The role of ethnologists extended beyond the collection of material artifacts; they also collected stories and wrote volumes on aboriginal life, and some even unabashedly used their research to further the process of colonization. Their writings contain many valuable descriptions of life in Indian communities during Curtis's lifetime, but they also helped develop a definition of Native cultures as being of value only when static. All change was viewed as culture loss, which served to reinforce the notion among non-Indian Americans that tribal cultures were edging ever closer to extinction. The scientific community supported these ideas as well, for example through "experiments" in skull measurement which purported to prove the superiority of the white race over other races, which, using Spencerian logic, meant the other races were on the road to disappearance. Even in academia it has taken most of the 20th century to begin to

cast many of these assumptions aside; they seem to be even longer lasting in popular culture.

In addition to ethnographers, patrons--both wealthy and not--collected Indian artifacts, spurred on by the myth of the vanishing race. J.L. Kraft (founder of Kraft Foods) collected Northwest Coast totem poles, one of which was long displayed on Chicago's lakefront. Milford Chandler and Richard Pohrt collected artifacts from across the continent, which are now in the holdings of the Detroit Institute of Arts, among other institutions. And J. Pierpont Morgan paid Curtis to photograph Indians.² In short order Curtis's photos became viewed as ethnographic representations, and have since evolved to a status in which they are studied for critical analysis of the role of ethnographers and collectors.

Railroad barons also used imagery of Indians as a vanishing race to sell tourist vacations to the west. Both the Santa Fe and Burlington Northern railway companies created tourism campaigns around these types of images. National Parks such as Grand Canyon and Glacier National Park displayed Indians in traditional regalia as haunting reminders of the past as part of their tourist attractions. In fact, these ideas came to permeate society, from advertising images to the images summer camps and resorts used to attract tourists to those portrayed in popular literature. Many of these images have had an amazingly long life and continue to saturate American culture. Peruse the shelves of your grocery store, read the sports pages of your local newspaper, check out the westerns or the romance novels in your local bookstore--images of Indians that suggest they are a part of American history that is no longer with us are abundant.

Myth of "The Vanishing Race" Endures

This imagery had long been a part of popular culture, but the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890 and the end of the Plains Indian wars, Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 announcement that the American Frontier had closed, and the federal attempts to forcefully eradicate Indian culture and assimilate Indians into American society all converged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to firmly cement that imagery as a myth of a vanishing race, with the notion that Indians are historical features of an American landscape, not functioning members in a modern society. Ironically the federal policy of forced assimilation was in itself a recognition that Indians had not disappeared from America, and the official reversal of that policy in the 1930s, however effective or ineffective that reversal may be judged to be, was also an acknowledgement that Indians had not vanished as either a people or as political communities. Indian cultures, though badly damaged by all of this, managed to survive in reality, but not in the mythology of the larger culture. It was within the context of this mythology that Curtis took these photos, and his doing so contributed in no small way to the continued pervasive presence of the myth of the vanishing race in American society even into the present time.

Notes

1. Horace H. Morgan, *The Historical World's Columbian Exposition and Chicago Guide* (St. Louis: Pacific Publishing Co., 1892), 269-70, 294.

2. Mick Gidley, "[The North American Indian Project](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/ienhtml/essay1.html)," in "Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952) and *The North American Indian*" (Chicago and Washington, D.C.: Northwestern University and American Memory Project, Library of Congress, 2001), <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/ienhtml/essay1.html>>.

Suggested Readings

Douglas Cole, *Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985.

Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, revised and expanded. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996.

Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Civilize the Indians, 1880-1920*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001.

L.C. Moses, *Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians, 1883-1933*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996.

Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967.

Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Russell Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History Since 1492*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987.

[Edward S. Curtis in Context](#)

[Edward S. Curtis's The North American Indian -- Home Page](#)