

**What No Man Has Ever Done,  
What No Man Could Ever Do:  
The Monumental Legacy of Edward S. Curtis**

Junior Division  
Individual Documentary

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## **Theme and Historical Context**

Edward Curtis was not just a photographer; he was an ethnographer. Though he is most known for his pictures in his 20-volume book series, “The North American Indian,” he really accomplished much more than that. Edward Curtis was a self-taught photographer and unofficially educated ethnographer. He took on the biggest project of his life: the monumental task of documenting over 80 tribes of Indians west of the Mississippi River that still maintained some of their culture. The whole project took him 30 years and it destroyed his life. He did more than just photograph the Indians, he also filmed their dances, recorded their songs and languages, and documented every aspect of their daily life. He was among the first photographers to use photography as an art medium, a controversial idea at the time. Curtis is often criticized for posing and editing his photos, potentially making them inaccurate. However, his drive to capture the cultures of all the tribes led to an enormous body of work that has proven irreplaceable to anthropology. Curtis did much of his work during the governmental cultural suppression of the Native Americans he was working with, and he recorded many banned dances and ceremonies. Fortunately, Curtis' records have proved extremely helpful to modern tribes in the restoration of their cultures.

## **Research**

I chose Edward Curtis during last year's History Day research trip in Alert Bay, Canada, after learning of his film, “In the Land of the Head Hunters,” and a project to restore it. I had never heard of Edward Curtis, so my mom filled me in on a few details. I hadn't really started thinking about “The Individual in History” yet, but the Indian topic I

had been doing that year was fascinating to me, and I became pretty curious about Curtis. As the year progressed, I really couldn't find any topic more interesting to me than Curtis and his life's work.

I began my research by looking up some library books, one of which proved very helpful. The introduction was about correspondence between Curtis and a retired librarian name Harriet Leitch. The letters seemed important, so I started looking for them in local archives and libraries. I eventually found them in the Seattle Public Library, and they were a vital resource. After extensive search that led from the Seattle Historical Society to the Museum of History and Industry to the Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, I located the most amazing box of files. It was stuffed full of primary documents, newspaper clippings, articles, book reviews, and notes. This was by far my best source of research material throughout the whole project. I chose to create a documentary because Curtis work has such a strong visual impact that could not be portrayed through any other medium.

I used iMovie '08, Garage Band, iDvd, iTunes, and iPhoto to create my documentary. My biggest challenge was the poor software design of iMovie '08.