

Duty Bound to Finish:

Edward S. Curtis and His Quest for Money
to Complete *The North American Indian*

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This paper was created under the auspices of the [Curtis Census](#), an independent effort to advance knowledge about Edward S. Curtis and *The North American Indian* by conducting and publishing relevant research. A primary task of the Census is to identify and locate all known sets and volumes of *The North American Indian*. The Census also serves as an information bank for archived documents and current studies related to the publication of the books.

Abstract

The North American Indian, published by Edward S. Curtis in 20 volumes between 1907 and 1930, is an acknowledged masterpiece of photography and ethnology. Today the books are highly prized for their stunning art and their detailed studies of many of the Indigenous nations of western North America. Dozens of writers have chronicled the story of their creator and his decades-long struggle to complete the work, but, for the most part, the complicated financial arrangements surrounding the project have not been fully explored.

This paper investigates the many fundraising efforts that sustained the work, including the Morgan family's support, subscription sales of the books, individual donations, income from other ventures, and personal loans to Curtis. Many of these efforts were overlapping during the course of the project. To better understand their individual significance, each effort is given its own section in this paper. The paper's conclusion summarizes the efforts and provides a tally of the estimated total revenue.

Keywords: Curtis, Indian, Native, Indigenous, books, photography, ethnography

Note: Many footnotes refer to documents in the Edward S. Curtis Papers, Archives of the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. To simplify the references, these will be noted as "The Morgan Library."

References to the original edition of *The North American Indian* (Cambridge, MA: The University Press [Vols. 1-5] and Norwood, MA: The Plimpton Press [Vols. 6-20], 1907-1930) are cited in the text as *TNAI*, followed by the volume number and page number.

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Introduction

When Edward Curtis proposed the idea of *The North American Indian* to J. P. Morgan in 1906, he estimated it would take at least \$1.5 million and five years to complete.¹ He didn't say how he arrived at this dollar amount, but he might have made a simple calculation: his initial plan was to sell a total of 500 sets of the books at \$3,000 or more each (500 x \$3,000 = \$1.5 million).

Had Curtis been able to complete his project in his proposed five-year timeline, it's possible that his original estimate would have turned out to be unusually prescient. However, as this paper will show, a more rigorous analysis provides a different scenario. Curtis failed to manage both the time and the money it would take realize his dream, and in doing so he created financial and logistical challenges that were nearly impossible to overcome.

It was only due to Curtis's relentless focus on completing his project that he was ultimately able to persevere. However, the toll for his obsession was highly personal: at the end of his project he was physically and mentally exhausted, and he never recovered from the tremendous debt he accumulated while working on it. When he died in 1952, the *New York Times* published a six-sentence obituary that called him "an authority on the history of the North American Indian." The last line of the obituary said, "Mr. Curtis was also widely known as a photographer."²

Like many great artists, Curtis didn't live to see the true value of his work appreciated by both the marketplace and scholars, but, in the history of photographic endeavors, his work may be unique in its scope and its original price tag³. It may also be unique in history: controlled by Curtis from start to finish, *The North American Indian* was at first a resounding success, lauded by collectors and institutions; then an anachronistic disaster, completely forgotten as time and society moved on; and, ultimately, a greater achievement than Curtis could have ever anticipated.⁴

[1] Edward Curtis letter to Belle Green, dated April 6, 1914. Box 1, Folder 8, The Morgan Library. All estimates of the present-day value of dollars were determined by using the [Inflation Calculator at Officialdata.org](#). Access dates: May-June, 2018. Current values may differ somewhat from those listed due to continuing fluctuations in inflation rates.

[2] "Edward S. Curtis," *New York Times*, October 20, 1952, 23.

[3] In 1936 photographer Carl Moon created a portfolio called *Indians of the Southwest*. The portfolio contain four atlas-portfolio volumes, each with 25 original prints taken throughout his career. The publication was limited to 50 sets at a price of \$3,500 (2018 equivalent: \$63,500) each. No more than ten sets were ever published. Haines, Robert D., Jr. *Carl Moon, Photographer & Illustrator of the American Southwest*, San Francisco: Argonaut Bookshop, 1982, unpagged introduction.

[4] In 2012, a single complete set of the books sold at auction for \$2.9 million. "Important Books, Atlases and Manuscripts: The Private Library of Kenneth Nebenzahl," Christie's, Sale 2622, April 10 2012. <https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/curtis-edward-s-1868-1952-the-north-american-5546029-details.aspx>. Access Date: June 24, 2018.

Becoming a Photographer

Born in Wisconsin in 1868, Edward Curtis moved with his father to the Puget Sound area of what was then Washington Territory in the fall of 1887. His father died about eight months later, just three days after his mother and his siblings joined them. Edward had no more than six years of education and his only training in photography came from a brief apprenticeship in Minnesota, but in 1891 he mortgaged their homestead and bought a partnership in a Seattle portrait studio. He was just 23 years old, and he soon realized that photography was his life's calling. He worked with two different partners for several years, then opened his own studio in 1898. He never looked back.

Early in his career, he developed a refined sense of artistic creativity in his work, as seen in his early non-studio images.⁵ His aesthetic sensibilities grew directly from his strong personal ambitions. He is known to have studied the photographs of noted pictorialist photographers in the era in which he lived, and by 1900 he was so confident of his skills that he began writing an advice column for photographers in the local magazine *The Western Trail*.

In one article he recommended that photographers who wanted to further their artistic skills “study the photographs of the recognized workers and the reproductions of many landscape painters.”⁶ He continued, “Let every one's [sic] work show individuality. Try to make it pronounced enough that a friend could pick up one of your pictures anywhere and know it was yours.”⁷ Today, more than 100 years later, many people may instantly recognize an Edward Curtis Indian photograph⁸ because of its distinctive style of penetrating portraiture as seen through the soft-focus lens of pictorialism.

[5] Gidley, Mick. “Pictorialist Elements in Edward S. Curtis's Photographic Representation of American Indians”, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 24, 1994, 182-83.

[6] The term “worker” as applied to photographers was popularized during the pictorialism era (1890-1920) to distinguish between newer photographers who “worked” to “create art” rather than old-school photographers of who merely recorded a scene with technical precision. The term appeared in some of the leading photography journals of that period, including *Anthony's Photographic Bulletin*, *British Journal of Photography*, *Camera Craft*, and, later, in Alfred Stieglitz's seminal journal *Camera Work*. Curtis's use of the term, which was still unusual at the time that he wrote, indicates that he must have known of the pictorialist movement and its promoters.

[7] Curtis, Edward S. “The Amateur Photographer”, *The Western Trail*, 1:6, May 1900, 468.

[8] Since this paper discusses *The North American Indian* books, the exonym “Indian” will be used from time to time to describe various Indigenous peoples of North America. The author acknowledges that this term may be objectionable to some people but notes that the terms “Indian Country” and “Indian Nations” are used widely by indigenous nations and tribes today. Whenever possible, the specific name of a Nation, tribe, or band will be used.

Curtis took his first Indian photographs around 1895-1896, not far from the studio he then shared with Thomas Guptill.⁹ In his photographs of Native Americans, he was freed from the conventions of his commercial studio portraits and could show the “individuality” of his work. He was so pleased with these images that he began traveling around the Puget Sound area to seek out other Native people he could photograph.

In 1898 Curtis had a serendipitous encounter with several important people on the slopes of Mt Rainier. An avid outdoorsman, Curtis was camped on the slopes of the mountain when he came upon a group of lost climbers. Among that group were three men who would become highly influential in the development of Curtis’s career: Gifford Pinchot, then Chief of the U. S. Division of Forestry (later known as the Forest Service); George Bird Grinnell, founder of the Audubon Society; and C. H. Merriam, head of the U.S. Biological Survey and co-founder of the National Geographic Society.¹⁰

Soon after that encounter Merriam arranged for Curtis to be the official photographer of the Harriman Expedition to Alaska, which was planned as the largest scientific expedition of Alaska ever undertaken. While traveling there for several months with Merriam and Grinnell, Curtis learned the fundamentals of ethnographic research.

The next year Grinnell invited Curtis to accompany him on a trip to the Blackfeet Reservation of Montana to witness their Sun Dance ceremony. It might have been Curtis’s first experience with a still robust community of Indians, and the contrast between what he had seen around Seattle and what he saw in Montana was powerful.¹¹

More importantly, while there Grinnell schooled Curtis in how to interact with Indians in a reasonably respectful manner, cautioning him to get to know the people as individuals first and

[9] There is some uncertainty about when Curtis took his first Indian pictures. In an article in *The Seattle Times*, he was quoted as saying, “I made my first Indian photograph in 1896 at Tulalip, on the shores of Puget Sound.” “Photo Historian of the Indians,” *The Seattle Times*, May 8, 1949, 4. Yet in a letter to Seattle librarian Harriet Leitch he wrote, ““The first photograph I ever made of an Indian was of PRINCESS ANGEL[I]N[E], [sic] the digger and dealer in clams.” See “Transcription of letters from Edward S. Curtis to Harriet Leitch, August 26, 1948 to August 4, 1951,” The Seattle Public Library, Special Collections Online.

<http://cdm16118.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p16118coll16/id/108/rec/1>. Access Date: 05/10/18.

[10] For details of that encounter, see Egan, Timothy, *Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher*. NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012, 25-32.

[11] There is some uncertainty about when Curtis first visited Montana. In TNAI Volume VI, page 12, Curtis wrote “The author first saw the Piegan during the summer of 1898 at the season of their medicine lodge ceremony.” However, all of the photos of the Sun Dance ceremony in that volume are dated 1900. The Getty Museum holds a photograph of a Sun Dance encampment that is dated 1898, and it does not appear to have been taken at the same time at the image in TNAI. There are no other known records of Curtis visiting Montana prior to 1900, so Curtis’s claim remains a mystery at this time.

foremost. Grinnell also encouraged Curtis to think bigger than his current approach to photographing these scenes when it was convenient.

The hyper-stimulating environment on the reservation, combined with Grinnell's dogged guidance and encouragement, soon opened Curtis's consciousness to a new world of possibilities. After his Montana experience, Curtis knew he could not go back to the life of running a photography studio. By the time he returned to Seattle, he had seized upon the idea of a grand and encompassing documentation of Indian life—a calling that was to be his sole mission for the next 30 years.¹²

Rise to Greatness

In 1903 Curtis traveled to the East Coast to speak with publishers about producing an edition of his Indian prints. When he returned to Seattle, Curtis reported that he “had no trouble in enlisting the interest of some of the largest publishers...in a portfolio, which in the time to come will be the accepted authority upon the aboriginal races of this continent.”¹³ This was the first reference to what would become *The North American Indian*, and it shows that even at this early stage Curtis had an ambitious vision for his photography.

One of the most influential people in the development of Curtis's project was President Theodore Roosevelt, whom Curtis met through an unusual chain of events. By the early 1900s Curtis's studio was the most successful photography business in Seattle, as well as one of the most successful portrait studios in America. People came to Seattle from all over the country to have their likeness taken by Curtis. As successful as he was, Curtis often looked for ways to increase his reputation. He couldn't resist the challenge when an opportunity for more national exposure came along at the same time he was speaking with publishers.

In late 1903 the *Ladies Home Journal*, then one of the most popular magazines in America, sponsored a contest for photographs of “The Most Beautiful Children in America.” At his wife Clara's urging, Curtis entered his portrait of four-year-old Marie Octavie Fischer of Seattle, and several months later his photo was chosen as one of twelve winners of the contest. Ironically, the

[12] In his General Introduction in Volume 1 of *The North American Indian*, Curtis wrote “The task of recording the descriptive material embodied in these volumes, and of preparing the photographs which accompany them, had its inception in 1898.” TNAI, 1, xiii.

[13] *Seattle Sunday Times*, September 13, 1903, 3.

magazine did not reproduce the photograph directly but engaged Walter F. Russell, a well-known society portrait painter of the time, to render the image in true “artistic fashion.”¹⁴

It was Russell who introduced Curtis to Theodore Roosevelt¹⁵, who at that time was closing out his first term as President. Roosevelt was so impressed with Curtis’s artistic skills that he invited him to photograph the younger Roosevelt children, as well as the inauguration for his second term in office and, later, his eldest daughter’s wedding. Curtis wound up taking many portraits of the Roosevelt family, and, more importantly, he bonded with the President over their mutual interests in the outdoors and the changing American West. The two also shared the then widely accepted but mistaken belief that the Indian Nations of the U.S. were a “vanishing race.”¹⁶

The years 1904-05 were watershed times in the development of what would become Curtis’s life-long project. By the start of this period he’d already created a substantial portfolio of Indian photographs, which until this time he’d shown mostly in his studio. He began to think again about reaching a larger audience, and early in 1904 he took the first steps to launch what was about to become his single-minded passion.

His first major opportunity came along in June of that year when the Women’s Century Club in Seattle held its first annual exhibition of “industrial and allied arts.” Curtis was given a one-person exhibition of his Indian photos, perhaps the first showing of his work outside of his studio.¹⁷

At the end of that year, Curtis presented a large exhibition of his Indian photographs at Christensen’s Hall in Seattle. Among the many prints in the show were his early iconic images *Vanishing Race*, *Getting Water*, *Acoma*, and *Jicarilla*, all dating from 1903-04. Two days later a reviewer in the *Seattle Times* waxed poetic about Curtis’s work, saying “Had Shakespeare ever seen the picture ‘In the Canyon de Chelly’ we might understand how he would let Hamlet say: ‘What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty!’”¹⁸

[14] Russell’s portraits based upon the photographs were described as being “crayon drawings”, a term still used at that time for pastel drawings. “Here are the Winning Children”, *The Ladies Home Journal*, February, 1904, 1. There are no known copies of Curtis’s original photograph of Fischer.

[15] Davis, Barbara. *Edward S. Curtis: The Life and Times of a Shadow Catcher*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1985, 38.

[16] The primary reason why this concept was so prevalent was that both the U.S. and Canadian governments had long had policies of “amalgamation,” which was a euphemism for the complete assimilation of all Indian nations into the Anglo-European society that was sweeping westward. Roosevelt, who espoused a more gradual approach on the issue than previous presidents, nonetheless fully supported the idea of so-called “boarding schools” that tore Indian children away from their families and subjected many of them to years of abuse. For more about Roosevelt’s attitudes toward Indians, see Dippie, Brian W. *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U. S. Indian Policy*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1982, 185-190.

[17] Martin, David F. “Curtis, Edward S. (1868-1952), Photographer”, History Link, <http://www.historylink.org/File/8857>. Access Date: May 28, 2018.

[18] *Seattle Sunday Times*, December 4, 1904, 2.

In an unusual move, the reviewer included the entire list of guests who were invited to the exhibition—nearly 700 names from the elite class of Seattle’s society. There’s no known list of which of them actually attended the event, but the mere act of publishing the names of people who might have been there substantially boosted Curtis’s status among the wealthy in Seattle.

At about the same time Curtis reached out to his friend E. H. Harriman, who introduced Curtis to the manager of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York. After seeing the hotel’s elegant ballroom, Curtis decided to take the substantial risk of paying \$1,300 (2018 equivalent: \$34,000) to rent the space for an exhibition of his photos.¹⁹ A few weeks later, in early January 1905, Curtis exhibited more than 100 of his Indian prints to a large New York audience.

Fortunately, his risk paid off. Reviewers universally praised his work, and the success of the show helped to advance Curtis’s reputation as a great photographer. Perhaps more importantly, it established Curtis as a perceived authority on Indian life. He also made the first of his soon-to-be many connections with the moneyed families of New York; among those who bought his Indian photographs were Mrs. Douglas Robinson, sister of President Roosevelt; Mrs. Frederick Vanderbilt; and Mrs. John Pierpont Morgan.

Meanwhile, Curtis continued to advance his stature as a respected photographer. In the spring of 1905 he exhibited more than 100 of his Indian prints in a private gallery at the enormous Lewis and Clark Exhibition in Portland, Oregon. Equally important, he was selected to be one of only 25 photographers included in a separate photographic art show at the same exhibition.²⁰ The organizers of the photography show included pictorialist greats Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen, and the co-exhibitors included such renowned names as Alvin Langdon Coburn, Gertrude Käsebier, and Clarence H. White. His inclusion in that illustrious group indicates that by that time he was already recognized for his strong artistic style. Being part of the exhibition also gave him the opportunity to see some of the best pictorialist photography in the country.

On July 2, 1905 the *Seattle Times* reported that a new organization had been formed in Seattle for the promotion of arts and crafts. The Seattle Art Association, “with a charter membership limited to twenty-one,” included “men prominent in all the professions and lines of business.” The Association voted as its first order of business to support the field work of Edward S. Curtis, saying he “is to be sent out immediately to complete the work he has undertaken in assembling portraits and historical data relating to famous Indian chiefs of the West.”

[19] Davis, 40.

[20] “Exhibition Notes: Pictorial Photography at the Lewis and Clark Exposition,” *Camera Work*, 11, July 1905, 57.

The extent of the support that was offered to Curtis is not mentioned, but the article suggests that it was in the form of a loan. It goes on to say, “The capital stock of the Art Association has been fully subscribed and paid up. It is intended when the funds expended in the work undertaken by Mr. Curtis is [sic] returned to the Association to utilize the money for the purpose of founding a permanent art gallery and holding art exhibits at regular intervals.”²¹

Curtis traveled to the Southwest in the early fall of 1905, photographing on the Hopi and the Navajo reservations, but there are no records that indicate this trip was made with the funding mentioned in the article. Thus far almost nothing else has been found about an organization named the Seattle Art Association that was active during this period; there are no known documents or other records for the organization in any local library or museum, and there are only a few brief mentions of the association in local newspapers. Absent any other information, this article presents the first of several enigmas in Curtis’s life.

As he continued to develop his idea of a major publication on the lives of Indians, Curtis again approached the publishing houses he had visited in 1903. The scope of the work he proposed for publication was now so enormous that all of them turned him down. Walter Page, Editor of Doubleday Page & Co., later wrote: “...we have gone over the subject from every point of view, but I am sorry to tell you we have not found any practicable plan.”²²

By the fall of 1905 Curtis was growing very frustrated. While he was receiving widespread praise for his Indian pictures, he couldn’t find a way to get them to a larger audience. He decided that perhaps he simply wasn’t dreaming big enough. Instead of peddling his art to apparently unappreciative publishers, he started to look in earnest for major investors who would fund not just a book but a complete series of books dedicated to recording every aspect of Indian life. It would be, he imagined, the definitive photographic and ethnographic record of the many Indian nations and tribes of the American West.

Remembering their long conversations about Indians, Curtis reached out to President Roosevelt for suggestions of people he might contact. Near the end of 1905 Roosevelt wrote back “There is no man of great wealth with whom I am on sufficiently close terms to warrant my giving a special letter to him; but you are most welcome to use this letter in talking with any man who has interest in the subject.”²³

[21] All quotes about the Seattle Art Association are from the *Seattle Sunday Times*, July 2, 1905, 3.

[22] Copy of a letter from Page to Curtis, dated January 23, 1906. Edward S. Curtis Papers, University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections.

[23] Egan, 44.

One of the reasons that Roosevelt was not on “sufficiently close terms” with wealthier people is that he had developed a reputation as “the trust buster,”²⁴ a title he earned by aggressively taking on the business behemoths that controlled much of the nation’s railroads and other major industries. In one of his first actions as president, Roosevelt had his administration file suit against the giant Northern Securities Company, which controlled almost all the railroad shipping across the northern half of the U.S. The company was owned by two of the wealthiest men in the country: E. H. Harriman, who Curtis had befriended in 1899, and J. P. Morgan, whom Curtis would soon meet.

Roosevelt’s use of federal laws against industrial giants began to limit the unfettered freedom that many of them had enjoyed, which in turn cut into the massive profits that some corporate leaders had been making by brutally exploiting workers and working conditions. As a result, many of the men “of great wealth” looked upon the President as their adversary. Roosevelt certainly did know many men “of great wealth,” but it’s likely he knew his recommendation would have been seen as a severe detriment rather than an advantage.

One perhaps apocryphal story best sums up the relationship between the business elite and Roosevelt. After he left the office of President in 1908, Roosevelt decided to complete one of his life-long dreams and go on a big safari in Africa. In a final jab back at the man who had thwarted many of his interests, financier J. P. Morgan is reported to have said about the trip, “America expects that every lion will do its duty.”²⁵

J. P. Morgan and the Launch of *The North American Indian*

Although Morgan was not a fan of Roosevelt, he turned out to be the biggest single supporter of Curtis’s work. In a highly fortunate turn of events, one of the people who had been impressed by Curtis’s exhibition at the Waldorf-Astoria was Louise Satterlee, Morgan’s married daughter. She tried for many months to convince her father that Curtis was someone he should meet, and finally in January 1906 Curtis was granted an appointment with Morgan. On January 23, the day before his scheduled meeting with the financier, Curtis sent Morgan a letter of introduction and an outline of his idea.

[24] Roosevelt’s action against Northern Securities was soon followed by other efforts to curtail the excesses of industrial giants. At his urging, Congress passed the Hepburn Act, a federal law that gave the government the power to regulate railroad shipping rates. For more information, see “The Trust Buster,” U. S. History website, <http://www.ushistory.org/us/43b.asp>. Access Date: May 22, 2018.

[25] “Roosevelt in Africa”, Ohio State University eHistory website, <https://ehistory.osu.edu/exhibitions/1912/content/RooseveltInAfrica>. Access Date May 20, 2018.

The plan, he wrote, was to “make a complete publication, showing pictures and including text of 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.; dividing the whole into twenty volumes containing fifteen hundred full page plates, the text to treat the subject much as the pictures do, going fully into their history, life and manners, ceremony, legends and mythology, treating it in rather a broad way so that it will be scientifically accurate, yet if possible, interesting reading.”

He estimated that the field work would require “five more years at an approximate annual expense of \$15,000, for the five years – \$75,000”.²⁶ He also hoped to demonstrate to Morgan that he had done his homework on publishing the books. He wrote, “...it has been estimated by publishers that a work of this nature would have to sell at five thousand dollars a set, and that one hundred sets could be disposed of in this country and abroad.”²⁷

When he appeared at Morgan’s office the next day, Curtis quickly experienced Morgan’s storied no-nonsense business style. After only a few minutes of listening, Morgan said he was not interested and started to walk out of the room. Curtis responded with a tenacity that would soon be one of his hallmarks. He asked Morgan to at least look at his photographs before he walked away. Morgan, who had always appreciated beautiful pictures, agreed, and within a few minutes he surprised his staff by changing his mind. It was one of the few times that Morgan ever reversed one of his decisions.

The next day Curtis returned to Morgan’s office and worked out the details of the financier’s support. Morgan agreed to fund Curtis’s project, to be known as The North American Indian (TNAI), but with very specific terms:

- Curtis would receive a total of \$75,000 (2018 equivalent: \$1.98 million), to be paid over the course of five years at the rate of \$15,000 (2018 equivalent: \$396,000) annually.
- The money could be used only for the field work expenses, including transportation; lodging; meals; photographic equipment and supplies; salaries for assistants and guides; and “money paid Indians for services in securing pictures, interpreter, etc.”
- No funding could be used as a salary for Curtis or to pay for any part of the publication of the books.
- In return for his funding, Morgan would receive 25 complete sets of the books, to be used as he saw fit.

[26] Curtis’s first letter to Morgan, dated January 23, 1906. Box 1, Folder 1, The Morgan Library. See Appendix A for Curtis’s list of his estimated annual expenses.

[27] Ibid.

- Morgan would also receive “three hundred original drawings [photographs], large, and two hundred small drawings [photographs].”²⁸

While Morgan’s support has often been characterized as a philanthropic gesture by a great man, both Curtis and he viewed the deal as a highly specific sales transaction. In a 1913 report for The North American Indian, Inc., Curtis described Morgan’s funding as “an advance subscription to twenty-five sets of the proposed books at \$3,000.00 each, or a total of \$75,000.00.”²⁹ He repeated this same explanation in a 1922 report, saying Morgan “...subscribed for twenty-five (25) sets at \$3,000.00, for which he paid \$75,000.00.”³⁰

In essence, Morgan agreed to fund the fieldwork up front in return for receiving the books after they were published. At the time this was a novel concept, but in many ways it is similar to today’s crowdfunding efforts for photography books. It’s not known if he was the first person to use this fundraising method, but, given how much money Morgan pledged, Curtis certainly was the most successful.

As a sign of how badly he wanted Morgan’s funding, Curtis also offered this shortsighted concession: “I plan to use in the future work, my present studio headquarters and working plant, and to a considerable extent my working force, and have for that reason made no mention of rent or office or laboratory, etc. etc.”³¹ In effect, he agreed to cover the considerable overhead costs of his own darkroom and studio operations that would be needed to carry out the project. This was one of several significant errors that Curtis made in estimating the potential costs of completing his project.

The deal was concluded with all of these conditions in place, and on March 30th, 1906 Curtis was handed a check for \$5,000, representing an advancement of one-third of that year’s funding.³² Curtis wasted no time in getting to work. He spent nearly nine months of 1906 in Arizona and New Mexico, photographing and documenting some of the Apache, the Jicarilla, and the Navaho people.

True to his word, Morgan supported the full amount of the project that Curtis proposed; Curtis received three \$5,000 checks annually from Morgan for the five full years. He and his team of

[28] Memorandum signed by Morgan, dated Feb. 13, 1906. Box 1, Folder 1, The Morgan Library.

[29] Edward Curtis. Untitled report to The North American Indian, Incorporated, dated February 13, 1913. Box 1, Folder 21, The Morgan Library.

[30] Curtis, Edward. “The North American Indian” [Annual Report 1922]. Box 1, Folder 21, The Morgan Library.

[31] Curtis’s first letter to Morgan, 3.

[32] Morgan’s staff hand-wrote the dates for 15 checks of \$5,000 each on Morgan’s original note authorizing the funding for the project. “Memorandum for purpose of record, Feb 13, 1906.” Box 1, Folder 1, The Morgan Library.

researchers and writers labored both in the field and in their editing of the books, and they succeeded in producing books that reviewers called “a monumental work” and “among the finest specimens of the printer’s art in the world.”³³

However, even with Morgan’s substantial support Curtis regularly spent more on the project than he received. He submitted periodic expense reports that showed he always exceeded his budget, sometimes substantially so, and he later wrote that each year’s field work “averaged about \$20,000.”³⁴

At the same time early subscription sales for the books were not at the level he needed to cover both the publishing and marketing costs, especially since during at least some of this time he received no salary or expense reimbursement for his sales work.³⁵

The North American Indian, Incorporated

Curtis’s financial deficits did not go unnoticed by J. P. Morgan. In late 1909 Morgan directed that a new enterprise known as The North American Indian, Incorporated (after this, “the corporation”) be formed to manage the finances and business side of Curtis’s work. He seeded the corporation with an additional \$60,000 (2018 equivalent: \$1.6 million), but once again his actions were in the

[33] Egan, 154-155.

[34] Edward Curtis. Untitled 1913 report.

[35] There is conflicting information about Curtis being paid a salary during the project. Although Morgan specified in his original conditions that Curtis would not receive any salary from his money, in his 1927 trial for failure to pay alimony Curtis told the judge “For the first three years I received \$5,000 a year....” The reporter also wrote that he said “for the last seven years he has labored without compensation....” *Seattle Star*, October 12, 1927, 1.

In his 1913 report to the corporation, Curtis wrote, “...up to that time [when the corporation was formed] no charge whatever had been made for my time. Mr. Stetson [Francis L. Stetson, Morgan’s personal attorney] personally suggested the salary which has since been paid....” Later in the same document he wrote that the corporation had \$10,500 in financial obligations, adding, “Something over \$6,000 of this is due me, about one-half on salary account, and the balance being money advanced.” Curtis, Untitled 1913 report, 6-8, The Morgan Library.

In a 1922 report to the corporation, Curtis provided estimated expenses for that summer’s field work, saying “During the summer of 1922 pictures can be made in two months for Volume XIII. Expense for same approximately \$1,250 and salary of \$77.00 a week for operator. Meyers is available for this work.” It’s unclear if he was referring to Meyers as the “operator”, or if the statement about Meyers in an afterthought. Curtis, Untitled 1922 report, 1, The Morgan Library.

One clue appears in a letter to Seattle librarian Harriett Leitch, dated April 10, 1951, Curtis wrote, “Also the records show that for more than seventeen years I did not receive any remuneration for time devoted to the project.” Since he formally began the project in 1906, he seems to imply that he might have received some compensation beginning in 1922. This would fit with his being the “operator” in his 1922 report. See “Transcription of letters from Edward S. Curtis to Harriet Leitch, August 26, 1948 to August 4, 1951,” The Seattle Public Library, Special Collections Online. <http://cdm16u8.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p16u8coll16/id/108/rec/1>.

Access Date: 05/10/18.

form of a business transaction rather than a philanthropic gesture. Morgan made a personal loan, repayable with 6% annual interest, to set up the corporation.

Initially the corporation issued 1,000 shares of preferred stock at \$100 each. Morgan claimed 600 shares, equal in value to the amount of his loan, and 400 shares were reserved for later offering.³⁶ Curtis was given 500 shares of common stock valued at \$50,000, which he wrote was the value of “my holdings.”³⁷

While the new money was a great relief to Curtis, almost all of it went to pay off the creditors whose numbers had been building due to the project’s repeated deficits. It’s a scenario that would play out many times over the next two decades: on paper Curtis appeared to have a great deal of money for his work, but in reality he almost always owed more than he received.

At the end of 1910 the agreed-upon five-year timeline for Morgan’s funding ended, but the field work for only eight of the planned twenty volumes had been completed. While the additional funding Morgan put into the corporation helped, it was not enough to continue the work at the pace that Curtis believed was necessary. He wrote to his colleague Frederick Webb Hodge: “...if I had an earthly thing that was not mortgaged, I should immediately start out to find some one [sic] to loan me a few dollars on it.”³⁸ Near desperation, he began to borrow money from Morgan and others to help finance the project (see below).

In 1913 J. P. Morgan died unexpectedly, and Curtis feared that the chance of any future funding also died with him. To his surprise and great relief, however, Morgan’s son Jack, who was now in charge of the family’s wealth, told Curtis that they did not want to see this part of their father’s legacy go unfulfilled. They agreed to continue the terms of the previous funding, allocating funding as needed for field work until the project was finished. To expedite the completion of the project, Curtis was relieved of much of the burden of selling subscriptions so he could concentrate on the field work and the editing process.³⁹

[36] In his 1913 report to the corporation, Curtis wrote about his hope of finding a purchaser for the stock so more funds would be available for his work. There is no known record of anyone buying the stock. Curtis, Untitled 1913 report, 5-6.

[37] Curtis. Untitled 1913 report. He did not detail what he meant by “my holdings,” but it’s likely he was referring to previously published books and photogravures that had not yet been sold.

[38] Egan, 219.

[39] The corporation hired one or more independent salesmen, working on commission, who began selling the books in place of Curtis. In his 1913 report to the corporation, Curtis stated that during the past year 22 subscriptions were sold, generating \$19,025 in income. Then he wrote, “paid out in commissions: \$8,377.50; giving us for the year on new orders above commission: \$10,647.50.” This accounting shows that 45% of the gross revenue was paid in commissions, which substantially reduced the net return on books sales.

Although the continued support of the Morgan family was critical to the success of Curtis's work, World War I had a major impact on the project. Shortages of workers, fuel, and supplies severely limited the possibilities of new field work, and new subscriptions dwindled to only a few each year throughout the war. By combining money he was able to borrow with the continued Morgan funding Curtis was able to make some progress on the project, but it was slow, and, especially at a personal level, increasingly painful.

For most of the years that Curtis was working on his project, he was away from Seattle and his family. He would return only once or twice a year for a few weeks, and even then he spent much of his time on his Indian pictures. His absences and devotion to his work caused increasing tensions at home, and after 1910 Curtis would often stay in Seattle at the private Rainier Club rather than at home.

By 1916 Curtis's wife Clara could take no more; his prolonged absences and the constant drain on the money she earned by managing the studio kept her in a continual state of stress. She filed for divorce, but due to Curtis's travels it was another three years before the divorce case went to court. When it did Curtis was dealt another serious setback. The judge ruled completely in his wife's favor, awarding her the sole title to the Curtis Studio and other properties they had jointly owned. Curtis was devastated by the personal and financial consequences of the decision, and it took him many months to again focus on his project.

The Longest Decade

Throughout the 1920s Curtis continually struggled to find enough money to finish his project. He was already suffering under a crushing amount of debt, and the loss of his studio, where he had sold many of his framed Indian photographs, plunged him even further into financial peril. With his adult daughter Beth's help he started a new studio in Los Angeles, and the two of them continued his work on the project from that city.

Now driven by a pending sense of possible doom for his project, Curtis worked relentlessly to finish the books. In 1922 he published Volume XII, the first new book in six years, but he could see that changes were coming to the Indian communities he visited now at an even faster pace than before. For a while, he earned some additional money by working as a second-unit cameraman for Cecil B. DeMille during the filming of *The Ten Commandments*, but that did not last long. In what must have been a humiliating and desperate final concession, beginning in 1925 he agreed to

surrender all of his copyrights to *The North American Indian* to the corporation in exchange for continued funding.⁴⁰

By this time most of the people who Curtis had depended upon throughout the project had left, partly because they could not live on the minimal and irregular salaries that Curtis paid them and partly because the project simply lasted much longer than they anticipated. When William Myers, who had been with him for twenty years, finally quit in 1926 it was almost too much for Curtis to bear. He wrote a tribute to Myers in the introduction to Volume XVIII, saying he was “faithful and self-sacrificing, often in the face of adverse conditions, hardship, and discouragement.”

The last four words of the tribute sum up much of this last period of the project. By necessity, Curtis was focused on completing the fieldwork, and he had little time to devote to further publicizing his work. Every bit of his waning energy went into his visits with the Indians and the lengthy editing process that each volume required.

In 1927 Beth and he boarded the steamer *Victoria* with the goal of visiting the native communities on the northwest coast of Alaska. It was an arduous journey, but Curtis, at last, was given hope that perhaps he had been wrong about “the vanishing race.” At Nunivak Island, he found a people who had not been devastated by the diseases that had ravaged almost every other native community and who, for the most part, still lived as they had for thousands of years. He wrote that “for the first time in thirty years work with the natives I have found a place where no missionary has worked.”⁴¹ In Curtis’s mind, this was a fitting end to his three-decades-long journey.

Back in Los Angeles, he toiled for months to finish the final texts. When the last volume was completed, he wrote, “...great is the satisfaction the writer enjoys when he can at last say to all those whose faith has been unbounded, it is finished.”⁴²

Due to lax and missing records, it has been impossible to determine exactly how much money the Morgan family provided to Curtis over the years. When Curtis was taken before a judge in 1927 for failure to pay child support, he claimed that “the Morgan estate will have paid about \$2.5 million

[40] There is no record of what Curtis received in return for the copyrights. He might have been given additional funding to complete the final volumes, and/or he might have had his previous loans from J. P. Morgan forgiven. He assigned the copyright to volumes 1-13 in 1925, volumes 14-17 in 1928, and volumes 18-20 in 1930. All of the original assignments of copyright are in The Morgan Library.

[41] Egan, 282. While no missionaries had reached the areas where Curtis visited in the late 1920s, by that time the people who lived there had several decades of contact with Russian and other fur-traders.

[42] Graybill, Florence Curtis and Victor Boesen. *Visions of a Vanishing Race: Edward Sheriff Curtis*. NY: Promontory Press, 1994, 109

when it's [the project's] done."⁴³ None of the surviving records indicate that the Morgan's support came close to this amount, and Curtis's claim was either an intentional exaggeration to impress those who still believed in him or the confused declaration of a man who by then was both physically and mentally exhausted.

The most commonly used estimate of the Morgan family's total support for *The North American Indian* is about \$400,000 over the 25-year life of the project.⁴⁴ It's challenging to convert this amount to a modern equivalent since there is no continuity to the records indicating when funds were received during the long time span of the relationship. In addition, due to the war the value of the dollar declined significantly during this period.⁴⁵ However, using a conservative estimate based upon a likely timeline, a present-day value for the Morgans' total support, not including loans, would be at least \$8 million.⁴⁶

Subscriptions

The development of the subscription process for the books highlights another of Curtis's shortcomings in his overall planning for the project. In his initial letter to J. P. Morgan, Curtis wrote, "It is impracticable to sell a work in parts...the present date buyer requires the completed works before he will agree to purchase."⁴⁷ Nonetheless, in agreeing to Morgan's terms that the publication and sales of the books would be Curtis's responsibility he was left with no choice but to offer a variety of subscription options, including pre-paying for all of the books, paying for each volume as it was published, or paying a set amount annually.⁴⁸

The bookkeeping challenges of tracking these various arrangements proved to be daunting, especially given the significant cost of the books. As part of their arrangement, Curtis and Morgan agreed that the books would be published in two editions, each with a different type of

[43] Egan, 292.

[44] The earliest use of this figure that I could find is in Davis, page 77. Several other authors have repeated this number; however, Davis did not cite a source for the amount. There are no identified records in the Morgan Library archives that provide evidence for this amount, and until the amount is independently verified it should be regarded as an approximation.

[45] For example, one dollar in 1906 was equivalent to \$26.64 in 2018, but by 1920 the effects of World War I had reduced the 2018 equivalent for one dollar to only \$12.48. See [Appendix E](#) for a chart showing the fluctuation of the dollar's value over the life of the project.

[46] See [Appendix B](#) for an accounting of this estimate.

[47] Davis, 45.

[48] The Morgan Library holds 112 original subscription agreements for the books, each signed by the buyer. Of these, seven indicate they were paid in full at the time of signing, 86 were paid on a per-volume basis, and 16 were paid on an annual basis. Three agreements do not indicate the method of payment.

paper for the photogravures. The standard edition, printed on Van Gelder artist paper or Japanese vellum, initially cost \$3,000 (2018 equivalent: \$77,750) for a complete set. The deluxe edition was printed on more delicate Japanese tissue, with a full leather binding for the books, and cost \$3,850 (2018 equivalent: \$99,750).

The cost for a set of the books was increased several times during the publication cycle, topping off in 1924 at \$4,200 (2018 equivalent: \$61,890, due to the dollar's devaluation) for the standard edition and \$4,700 (2018 equivalent: \$69,260) for the deluxe version.⁴⁹ These prices remained throughout the decade.

The original plan was that the number of sets from both editions would be limited to a total of 500, but reports written by Curtis indicate that he later reduced that total to 300 sets. Key historical documents help provide a framework for when and how subscriptions were sold, and they provide some clues about subscription totals at different points along the way.

Unfortunately, Curtis was often lax in his reporting about subscriptions, and some of his reports include numbers that conflict with other statements.

For example, in 1914, Curtis wrote to Belle Greene (Morgan's personal librarian and point person for *The North American Indian*) that "Our average [book] sales per year for the past six has been twenty-three."⁵⁰ This would mean that approximately 138 sets had been sold during the previous past six years. However, by 1914 Curtis had been selling books for seven years, beginning in 1907. It's not known if he purposely excluded that year from his statement for some reason or if he simply miscalculated the number of years.

In a 1922 report to the corporation Curtis wrote "During the last six years subscriptions have averaged three (3) each year and for the four (4) previous, ten (10) each year. Altogether there are about 190 subscriptions outstanding, of which about fifty (50) are paid in full in advance."⁵¹ According to this statement, about 18 subscriptions were sold from 1916 to 1921, and 40 were sold from 1912 to 1915. The latter number appears to conflict with his statement from 1914 when he claimed that an average of 23 sets was sold during each of the previous six years. It's possible, however, that by stating his numbers as averages in 1914 he was taking into account that more sets had been sold in the earlier years and fewer were sold in the later years.

[49] Gidley, Mick. *Edward S. Curtis and The North American Indian, Incorporated*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 110.

[50] Curtis, Edward S. Letter to Belle Greene dated April 6, 1914. Box 1, Folder 6, The Morgan Library. In his 1913 report to the corporation, Curtis included a list of subscriptions sold during 1912. The list contains 22 names.

[51] Curtis. Untitled 1913 report.

To further complicate matters, in a financial statement that accompanied the 1922 report, Curtis wrote: “There are ten (10) subscriptions on which it will probably be impossible to collect payments, but if [all] volumes and portfolios are to be shipped [to] these subscribers in any event there would have been published at least 193 sets.” He added, “Thirty-four subscriptions (not included in the above figures) have been canceled or closed.”

Curtis specifically stated that the 193 subscriptions he mentioned included the 25 sets that went to Morgan; accordingly, subscription sales up until that time looked like this:

Years	Subscriptions Sold (including Morgan's 25 sets)
1906-1911	135
1912-1915	40
1916-1921	18
Canceled	34
Total	227

Curtis’s comment about the canceled subscriptions does not state that any of the books from these subscriptions had been printed, but, given that eleven volumes were already published by the time he wrote the 1922 report, it seems likely that at least some volumes were printed for most, if not all, of these sets.

In the same report, Curtis outlined the projected costs for printing volumes 14 through 17, stating “the cost for a run of three hundred (300) copies of the book and corresponding sets of portfolios...” would be \$16,000 per volume.⁵² His comment reveals that by 1922 he was anticipating sales of only 300 sets of *The North American Indian* rather than the 500 he had originally planned.

On the final page of the same report, Curtis listed the assets of the corporation. He grouped expenses for proposed volumes 13-20 under a heading that says “300 sets”, which again indicates this was his target number at that time for overall subscriptions.

Curtis continued selling subscriptions for as long as he could find buyers, and the last documented sale was on September 23, 1926. The Morgan Library holds 112 original subscription agreements for the books, but only six of them are dated after 1921. Since the subscription records are incomplete, it’s possible that there were other transactions during this period. Certainly, no sales took place after the October 1929 Wall Street crash that sent the country into a lasting economic depression.

[52] Curtis, Untitled 1922 report, 1.

After Curtis completed the last volume in 1930, the Morgan family quickly lost all interest in the project. The final books were shipped to subscribers, and the project ended without any fanfare or public notice. Curtis, exhausted and financially ruined, checked into a long-term care hospital in Denver as a charity case. He would not re-emerge until nearly two years later.

In 1935 the Morgan family sold almost everything related to *The North American Indian* still in their possession to Charles Lauriat Books in Boston. Among the items in the sale were 14 complete and bound sets of the books; many printed but unbound pages that could be assembled into additional sets; all of Curtis's research, notes, and recordings; and an estimated 285,000 photogravures printed during the project's lifetime.⁵³ Lauriat paid \$1,000 for everything.

Many authors of works about Curtis have said that the likely number of published book sets was 272. That number comes from a typewritten list produced by someone at Lauriat Books while the Morgan assets were still at their store.⁵⁴

The Lauriat document has been the most comprehensive list of sets of *The North American Indian*, but the Curtis Census has found several errors or inaccuracies in the list. So far these amount to no more than three percent of the total, which is an acceptable margin of error given the lack of consistency in other records.

For now, one can work backward from known numbers and arrive at a likely scenario. Curtis indicated that the final volumes (and thus all sets) were limited to 300 copies. The Lauriat Company later sold 14 complete sets of the books that were already bound, and they are thought to have sold an additional 24 sets assembled from unbound pages and photogravures that were previously printed. Through simple subtraction, one may conclude that while Curtis was still active no more than 262 sets (300-14-24) could have been sold.

Based upon the previous sales estimates and the likely maximum number of sets that Curtis could have sold, this may be the most feasible accounting for the total sales of the books while Curtis was involved:

[53] Since all of these materials originally came from Curtis, the most likely explanation for the large number of photogravures is that for the first 10 volumes or so he ordered enough photogravures from the printers to fulfill the planned edition of 500 sets. The first ten volumes contain 1,110 photogravures, and if 500 copies of these were printed there would have been a total of 555,000 photogravures printed. Since it's known that less than 300 sets of the books were sold, it's plausible that there could have been a large stockpile of unused photogravures from the earlier volumes.

[54] "The Lauriat List", The *Curtis Census* website. <https://www.curtiscensus.com/lauriat-list> Access Date: May 25, 2018.

Years	Subscriptions Sold (including Morgan's 25 sets)
1907-1911	135
1912-1915	40
1916-1921	18
1922-1930	6-17 ⁵⁵
Canceled	34
Total	233-244

However, all of the books that Lauriat sold were assigned to set numbers in their list. Thus far the Census has found 18 complete but unnumbered sets that are not accounted for in the Lauriat list. Based upon the known provenance for some of these sets, which include purchase dates after 1935, it's likely that most or all of them were assembled by Lauriat as well. By subtracting these 18 sets from the previous number of 262 sets that Curtis could have sold, that number is reduced to 244 sets. This matches the higher total number in the table above.

Given these numbers, it now seems reasonable to say that, including the books that went to J. P. Morgan, somewhere between 233 and 244 sets of *The North American Indian* were sold from 1906 to 1930.⁵⁶

As with the Morgan's money, it is difficult to determine a value for the total revenue from the subscriptions. Based on the information from Curtis's reports, we have a general idea of approximately how many subscriptions were sold and when some of the transactions took place. However, there are several variables that could affect this total, including the added revenue from the sale of deluxe editions, lost revenue from canceled subscriptions, and Curtis's discretion in giving some people discounts in to assure the close of a sale.⁵⁷

[55] There are six documented sales during this period. Based upon other known numbers, it's possible there were as many as 11 additional subscriptions for which the documentation has not survived. The original subscription forms are in Box 1, Folder 11, The Morgan Library.

[56] In her Master's thesis on Edward Curtis, Beth DeWall claimed only 234 sets were sold and published. She did not provide any documentation about how she arrived at this number. DeWall, Beth B. *The Artistic Achievement of Edward Sheriff Curtis*. University of Cincinnati, 1980, 9.

[57] For example, in 1916, when the advertised price of a set was \$3,500, Curtis authorized the sale of a second set of the books to Samuel Hoffman of New York City for \$3,000, the same price Hoffman had paid for his first set in 1908. The authorization appears on the original subscription agreement for set #329, Box 1, Folder 10, The Morgan Library.

Taking all of these factors into account, a conservative estimate for all of the subscriptions revenue is about \$687,500 (2018 equivalent: \$16.7 million).⁵⁸

Patrons and Honorary Regents

The economic impacts of World War I caused many wealthy families to rethink their priorities. Some had lost sons or other family in the war; some had lost part of their fortunes; and almost all now wanted to forget about the past and focus on the future. The sales of new subscriptions dwindled to only a few sets a year during and after World War I, and Curtis became more desperate than ever to raise additional funds for his project.

By the fall of 1920 Curtis had sufficiently recovered from the blow of his divorce settlement to again focus on his work, and he launched a new effort to appeal to wealthier individuals. He sent beautifully printed invitations to an unspecified number of people, asking them to become “patrons” of *The North American Indian*.

Curtis had started referring to some of his subscribers as patrons as early as 1910, but it appears that the 1920 effort was an attempt to completely rebrand the subscription process. The new invitations appealed directly to the nation’s post-war sentiments by asking people to join “a strictly co-operative effort to further a matter of national—in fact, international—importance” by purchasing a set of *The North American Indian*. Perhaps in recognition of the overall change of the public’s interest in the project, the invitation states that it was being sent only to “yourself and fifty others.”⁵⁹

There is no known record of who received the invitation or how many new subscriptions resulted from the appeal. There is also no known way to distinguish between a patron’s subscription and other subscriptions that were sold during this period. For a total of all subscriptions that are thought to have been sold during this period, please refer to the summary of all revenues from subscriptions provided earlier in this document.

At about the same time, Curtis launched a separate effort that was intended to interest a slightly different class of prospective customers. He sent another set of printed invitations asking people to become what he called “Honorary Regents” for *The North American Indian*. This invitation appealed to the civic duty of the elite class by asking 250 people to contribute \$1,000 (2018

[58] See [Appendix C](#) for a breakdown of the numbers behind this estimate.

[59] “Honorary Regents”, *Curtis Census* website, <https://www.curtiscensus.com/honorary-regents>. Access Date: May 20, 2018.

equivalent: \$12,225) each so that 50 sets of the books could be distributed to “leading universities, libraries and scientific institutions of Europe and America....”⁶⁰

To give the invitation a sense of urgency, Curtis repeated his mistaken colonialist outlook by saying “This is a gift of priceless value and unobtainable in any other way, as all traces of much of the life and traditions of the primitive Indians either have vanished or are rapidly disappearing.”⁶¹

The invitation begins with the names of nine individuals who presumably had agreed to become Honorary Regents. In his 1922 report to the corporation, Curtis wrote that as of March 1st “the number of paid subscriptions [as Honorary Regents] is twenty-eight (28) and two (2) not yet paid, altogether thirty (30).”

However, he goes on to explain that “the expenses of obtaining contributions in this way is about 50%, but is now limited to 40%. The balance in the fund is \$13,776.26.” It’s unknown how Curtis arrived at this figure or what expenses he was allocating to this effort, but assuming his figures are reasonably accurate the Honorary Regents program was a very expensive fundraising operation.

The Census has thus far identified three book sets that have an added bookplate referring to this effort.⁶² The plate lists the names of 35 individuals, and only one of these names is the same as any of the names on the invitation. This appears to indicate that at least 43 people (9 on the invitation + 34 on the bookplate) agreed to contribute \$1,000 each for this effort.⁶³

Based on this information, the total revenue from these 43 donors would have been \$43,000 (2018 equivalent: \$550,000), with net revenue of about \$22,000 (2018 equivalent: \$329,000). At the 1922 full subscription cost of \$4,000 per set, this money would have provided about five sets. However, as with other aspects of Curtis’s project, there is no known accounting of how many sets were actually distributed. It’s possible that more than three book sets were presented through this effort, and the Census asks that anyone with knowledge of sets that include the Honorary Regent bookplate contact them with that information.

[60] By hoping to raise \$250,000 to distribute 50 sets of the books, Curtis was asking for the equivalent of \$5,000 per set at a time when the sets were being sold to individual subscribers for \$4,000.

[61] This and other quotes on this page are taken directly from Curtis’s printed invitation for the Honorary Regents. A [copy of the invitation](#) is available on the *Curtis Census* website.

[62] One is in the collection of Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, and a second set belongs to Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. The Art Institute of Chicago has a record of once owning a set that had an Honorary Regents bookplate, but that set is no longer in their collection; its present location is unknown.

[63] “Honorary Regents,” *Curtis Census* website.

The Picture Musicales and *In The Land of The Head Hunters*

In 1911, as he was getting near the end of Morgan's initial funding, Curtis decided to use the coming months to go on "a big and active selling campaign, personally conducted, covering all parts of the United States, beginning in October and ending next spring."⁶⁴ Never one to do anything half-heartedly, he created what he called "picture musicales" or sometimes "picture operas" in which he would lecture about his pictures while showing hand-colored Magic Lantern slides.

Curtis presented these pageants accompanied by a full orchestra with a musical score especially created for this purpose. He presented them at least a dozen times in major cities on the east and west coasts, and each time they sold out to packed houses.⁶⁵

However, as with most of Curtis's grandiose schemes, he greatly underestimated the cost of producing these events and equally overestimated the returns. Most of the event tickets were inexpensive, so even with a full audience the shows brought in very little money.⁶⁶ Curtis lost an average of \$300-\$500 on each production, further adding to his financial woes. After a few months, he stopped scheduling further productions and wrote to Fredrick Hodge, "Things are fearfully discouraging, but I am always hoping for the best."⁶⁷

Never one to stop believing in his work, shortly after that Curtis conceived of an even grander venture. It would be a full-length motion picture, portraying an Indian saga in such spectacle and drama that audiences would flock to it in theaters across the country. It would be so successful, he estimated, that it would bring in annual profits of at least \$100,000.⁶⁸

In 1912 he headed to the northern end of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, where he spent months filming a scripted drama with hired actors from the Kwakiutl (now, Kwakwaka'wakw) communities. The film, *In the Land of The Head Hunters*, cost more than \$75,000 (2018 equivalent: \$1.85 million), but when it debuted in 1914 it grossed only \$3,269 (2018 equivalent: \$80,000) after a full week's run.⁶⁹ A dispute with the film's distributor led to its being pulled from further screenings, and Curtis soon realized the film was another in what had already become a streak of

[64] Letter written to Frederick Hodge, June 7, 1911. Graybill, 73.

[65] See Gidley, 1998, 199-229 for detailed descriptions of the musicales and Curtis's efforts related to them.

[66] Tickets to the premier of the show at Carnegie Hall ranged from \$25 for a box seating eight to 50 cents for seats in the balcony. At most events, tickets cost 25 to 50 cents. Prices are from flyers advertising the events, Edward S. Curtis Papers, University of Washington, Special Collections.

[67] Davis, 61.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Egan, 240.

financial disasters for him. He wrote to Hodge, “I am sparring for my life and gasping for breath and at the same time working so hard that I am worn to more than the old time thin edge.”⁷⁰

After these two theatrical failures, Curtis gave up on further large-scale promotions. The country was starting to feel the full impacts of World War I, and for the next four years the public’s attention was focused on the international situation and the growing threat to national security. There is no known accounting for the revenue from these two efforts. For the purposes of this paper, a conservative estimate is approximately \$10,000.

Other Books

While he was filming in British Columbia in 1913, Curtis was in a serious accident that left him with a life-long limp.⁷¹ In the months that it took him to recuperate from his injury, he took the time to write a trade-edition book for younger audiences with abbreviated and dramatized versions of some of the Indian stories he had recorded. Published in 1914, *Indian Days of the Long Ago* was, according to Curtis, a “best seller; the sales went far above a million the first year.”⁷² This number seems like another of Curtis’s many exaggerations; the book does not appear in any list of best-selling titles for 1914 or any year after that.

Nonetheless, the book was successful enough that Curtis published a second title a year later: *In the Land of the Head Hunters: Indian Life and Lore*. This slim volume was a direct tie-in to the movie of the same name. There are no records or family knowledge of how well this title sold.

Both books sold for \$1.20 each at the time, and it’s likely that Curtis received no more than 10% of that amount. There’s no record of exactly how much money Curtis received from the sales, but in 1948 he wrote to Seattle librarian Harriett Leitch, “Many years ago 35 years [sic] the World Book Co. published a pair of small books for me. ‘Believe it or not’ I am still drawing royalties on them.”⁷³

Since he was able to go back to his fieldwork in British Columbia in 1915, it appears that some of the book sales must have helped to temporarily improve his financial situation. If Curtis’s claim about the total book sales is true, it’s possible that he would have earned between \$25,000 and

[70] Ibid.

[71] Graybill, 70. Curtis said he was injured when a whale slapped its tale near the canoe where he was filming. He was thrown from the canoe with such force that his hip was broken, and it took him several months to fully recover.

[72] Curtis letter to Harriett Leitch, dated December 26, 1948.

[73] Ibid.

\$50,000 from the sales. Absent any evidence, a conservative estimate for the revenue from these two books would be no more than \$10,000.

Loans

From the beginning, Curtis pushed the limits of his finances by obtaining personal loans to support his work. In 1905 he reached out to his friend Gifford Pinchot and asked for a loan of \$7,000 (2018 equivalent: about \$185,000) to help him launch a project to record Indian life throughout the American West. Pinchot abruptly replied that he was “not in the position to take the matter up” at that time.⁷⁴

Undaunted, Curtis appealed to his friend Edmond Meany, who in turn asked his wealthy friends in Seattle to help. A group soon contributed \$20,000 (2018 equivalent: \$508,000), the first of many loans Curtis secured over the years.⁷⁵ The money was used to organize exhibitions in Seattle and New York that were critical to the advancement of Curtis’s career.

In 1911 Curtis appealed to one of his subscribers, railroad tycoon Henry E. Huntington, for a loan of \$10,000, to be repaid over two years. He offered \$20,000 of his common stock in the corporation as collateral. Huntington did not respond to the request.⁷⁶

In 1912, when it became clear that even J. P. Morgan’s additional funding would not be enough to finish his project, he took out a loan from Morgan of \$12,500 (2018 equivalent: \$305,625). Later he asked for and received another loan for \$5,000 (2018 equivalent: \$121,000). Each time Morgan charged 6% interest, further driving Curtis into an accumulated debt from which he was never able to recover.⁷⁷

In 1915, Gifford Pinchot, who had turned down Curtis’s request for a loan in 1905, agreed to give him a loan but for just \$1,000 (2018 equivalent: \$24,225). Curtis repaid \$800 of the loan the following year, but there’s no record of his repaying the full amount.⁷⁸

Also in 1915, Curtis asked Northern Pacific Railroad executive (and TNAI subscriber) J. J. Hill for a loan of \$15,000 (2018 equivalent: \$363,500). As a sign of his anxiety over having enough money to finish his project, Curtis emphasized to the businessman that the railroad would receive

[74] Gidley, 1998, 118.

[75] Davis, 42.

[76] Graybill, 119.

[77] Egan, 216.

[78] Gidley, 1998, 118.

“considerable advertising in connection with Indian pictures.” Hill declined without offering a specific reason for his decision.⁷⁹

In 1918 New York businessman J. W. Ackley lent Curtis \$5,000 (2018 equivalent: \$83,300). Ackley held Curtis’s corporate stock as collateral for the loan. It was supposed to be paid back in three months, but Curtis was unable to make a single payment. In 1924 Ackley renewed the loan (which then totaled \$6,950, due to unpaid interest) with the provision that he would receive a complete set of TNAI if Curtis could not repay the funds.

There is no written record of what happened with the loan, but a small note now in the collection of the Morgan Library indicates that Ackley would be willing to accept a complete set of the books as full payment and return Curtis’s stock to him.⁸⁰ The Lauriat list shows J. A. Ackley as owning set #28.⁸¹

In all, existing records show that Curtis received at least \$43,500 in loans, although it’s possible that he received additional funding from loans where no documents have survived.

Other Income

In his 1906 introductory letter to J. P. Morgan, Curtis wrote, “As the collection now stands, it represents the expenditure of a number of years of time and some \$25,000 in money on the work.”⁸² He offered no accounting for that number, but it’s unlikely that he could have earned that much profit from his studio work up until that time. It’s possible he was including the \$20,000 loan that Edmond Meany had arranged for him, but it’s also possible that this was another of Curtis’s exaggerations about his project.

Up until 1919 Curtis received at least some portion of the revenues from his studio. There is no known record of the amounts of money he received, but it would have included revenue from the portraits taken there, income from the sales of his Indian pictures, and occasional income from the sale of Indian blankets, pottery, and other collectible items shown in his store gallery. Curtis was very distraught when all ownership in the studio was given to his wife as part of their divorce settlement in 1919; his distress was due in part to the loss of the income from the studio but also because almost all of the preparation of the images for his books had been done there.

[79] Ibid.

[80] The original loan document is in the Morgan Library.

[81] On Dec 4 2009 Christie’s sold the complete text volumes (without the portfolios) of set #28. It was listed in the auction catalog simply as “the property of a lady.”

[82] Curtis’s first letter to J. P. Morgan.

In the 1920s Curtis took increasingly desperate measures to find funding for his work. At a low point in 1922, he sold the negative for his film *In the Land of the Head Hunters* to the American Museum of Natural History for a mere \$1,500 (2018 equivalent: \$22,370).

Excluding the money that might have come from the Meany loan, a conservative estimate of other funding that Curtis might have contributed would be no more than \$10,000 (2018 equivalent: \$245,000).

Conclusion

A tally of all of the amounts detailed in the sections above is provided below. It's important to keep in mind that all of the revenue estimates in this article are based upon the best available information at this time. There may be other sources of income that are not documented in known archives, but, even as a base set of estimates, these figures indicate the extraordinary scope of Curtis's fundraising efforts.

Category	Estimated Original Gross Revenue	Estimated 2018 Equivalent
Morgan Funding	\$400,000	\$8,000,000
Subscriptions	\$687,500	\$16,745,000
Patrons / Honorary Regents	\$22,000	\$330,000
Pageants and Films	\$10,000	\$250,000
Other Books	\$10,000	\$250,000
Loans	\$43,500	\$1,000,000
Other Income	\$10,000	\$245,000
Total	\$1,183,000	\$26,820,000

While it's possible to estimate the overall revenue that Curtis earned, what's missing from any accounting is a similar estimate of his true expenses. Given the amount he raised, it seems difficult to believe that Curtis wound up spending more than he brought in. There is nothing in his records to indicate that he was lavish in his spending, and by his own accounts he preferred simple camp life over the elegant hotels of east coast cities. We don't know why Curtis continued to overspend, especially since it placed such a personal burden on him, but his correspondence over the years indicates that he was acutely aware of his situation at any given time.

In a speech he gave at the University of Washington in 1907 Curtis closed by saying, “You may ask how long the field work will last. When the Navaho [sic] does not know the answer, he says ‘Whoola,’ which is, perhaps, the only answer. This I do know. That for six years more the work will be driven to the limit of human endurance. After that there will be a little more leisure.”⁸³

As with almost everything he did while working on *The North American Indian*, Curtis badly underestimated what it would take to complete the project. He drove himself “to the limits of human endurance” not for just six years but most of the next two decades. And in the end it was not leisure that awaited him, but the Rocky Mountain Hospital near Denver and, at least during the rest of his lifetime, obscurity.

When he came before a judge in 1927 to answer Clara’s charges that he had not paid the alimony that was due as part of their divorce, Curtis was visibly showing the cumulative stress from his two decades of struggling to complete *The North American Indian*. The judge asked why he continued to work on the project when it was taking such an obvious toll on his personal and financial life. Curtis replied, “Your Honor, it was my job. It was the only thing I could do that was worth doing...I was duty bound to finish.”⁸⁴

Understanding the totality of Curtis’s fundraising efforts adds a greater dimension to the scale of what he was able to do. He rose entirely of his own doing from the simplest of family backgrounds to mingling with some of the wealthiest and most influential people in the world, while at the same time creating a lasting masterpiece of photography and ethnography. Few people have met such challenges, and fewer still have overcome them to forge a legacy that will continue to last for generations to come.

[83] Gidley, 1978, 353.

[84] For more details about the 1927 hearing, see Egan, 291-294.

Appendix A

Curtis's Projected Annual Expenses for Field Work

Three Assistants	\$3,400
Transportation (Railroad)	\$1,000
Hotel and Commissary expenses of self and assistants while in field and for Indians while at work	\$2,000
Livery: hiring pack and saddle animals; loss of horses bought and discarded, or sold at a loss	\$1,000
Interpreters	\$ 900
Money paid Indians	\$1,450
Photographic plates	\$1,000
Copyright fees and material used	\$2,000
Motion picture films	\$1,800
Equipment rental	<u>\$ 500</u>
	\$15,050

Curtis provided this list to J. P. Morgan in 1906 as part of his proposal for funding. He consistently spent more than his estimates for all five years of Morgan's initial funding. The list is in Box 1, Folder 1, The Morgan Library.

Although Curtis initially envisioned the core of his project as a photographic work, he included the cost of "motion picture films" in his expense estimates. He justified this expense by saying "A series of carefully made motion pictures of the Indian's ceremonial life must be of considerable value to the student as well as to the world at large, and as the other work requires my covering this ground, this material can be secured for the future at nominal expense and I feel that it would be a great mistake not to include it in the other work."⁸⁵

[85] Curtis's first letter to J. P. Morgan, Box 1, Folder 1, The Morgan Library.

Appendix B

Morgan Payments for *The North American Indian Field Work*

Year	Original Amount	2018 Equivalent
1906	\$15,000	\$396,000
1907	\$15,000	\$381,000
1908	\$15,000	\$388,000
1909	\$15,000	\$396,000
1910	\$15,000	\$381,000
1911	\$60,000	\$1,523,000
1912-1916	\$80,000	\$1,810,000
1920-1925	\$85,000	\$1,250,000
1926-1930	\$100,000	\$1,475,000
Total	\$400,000	\$8,000,000

The amounts and dates of payments from 1906 to 1911 are known from documents in the collection of the Morgan Library in New York.

Payment amounts after 1911 are estimated, based upon general historical information. The total amount of \$400,000 comes from Barbara A. Davis, *Edward S. Curtis: The Life and Times of a Shadow Catcher*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1985, 77.

As of 2018 no documents have been found to independently verify the total support provided by the Morgan family after 1911.

Appendix C

Estimated Revenue from Subscription Sales

Years	Probable Sets Sold	Set Price	Estimated Revenue	2018 Equivalent	Notes
1906-1910	135	\$3,000	\$405,000	\$10,788,000	Based on 135 sets sold at \$3,000 each
1911-1914	40	\$3,000	\$120,000	\$3,050,000	Based on 40 sets sold at \$3,500 each*
1915-1920	18	\$3,500	\$67,500	\$1,000,000	Based on 18 sets sold at \$3,750 each
1921-1930	11	\$4,000	\$44,000	\$630,000	Based on 11 sets sold at \$4,000 each
Canceled	34	\$3,000	\$51,000	\$1,275,000	Based on 34 sets sold at \$1,500 each**
Totals	238		\$687,500	\$16,745,000	Rounded up to the nearest \$5,000

*This is the gross amount raised. After 1911 one or more salesmen working on commission sold many of the subscriptions. They were paid between 40% and 50% of the gross, and the money that went to fund the production of the books was reduced by that amount.

**The specific dates when orders were canceled are not known. For the purposes of this table, an amount equal to one-half of the lowest subscription price was used to calculate the estimated revenue.

Notes

For the first five years of the project Curtis was solely responsible for raising all of the money to publish and sell the books. After that one or more salesmen working on commission were responsible for many of the new subscriptions.⁸⁶ The revenue through 1910 was managed by Curtis, and all revenue after that was handled by one or more managers at The North American Indian, Incorporated.

There is no continuity to documents that might provide a similar estimate of the expenses throughout the project. Curtis is known to have regularly spent more than the revenue he received, but there are major gaps in the documentation for his expenses.

[86] Once the corporation was created Curtis was supposed to be relieved of the responsibility of selling the books, but that did not happen immediately. In 1912 Curtis wrote to Belle Green that “During the past winter and spring I have spent the great part of the time in an effort to further book sales....The first four months of the coming year I plan to devote to sales, and possibly by a year from now we can have the whole matter in somewhat better shape.” Curtis letter to Belle Green, dated June 21, 1912. Box 1 Folder 5, The Morgan Library.

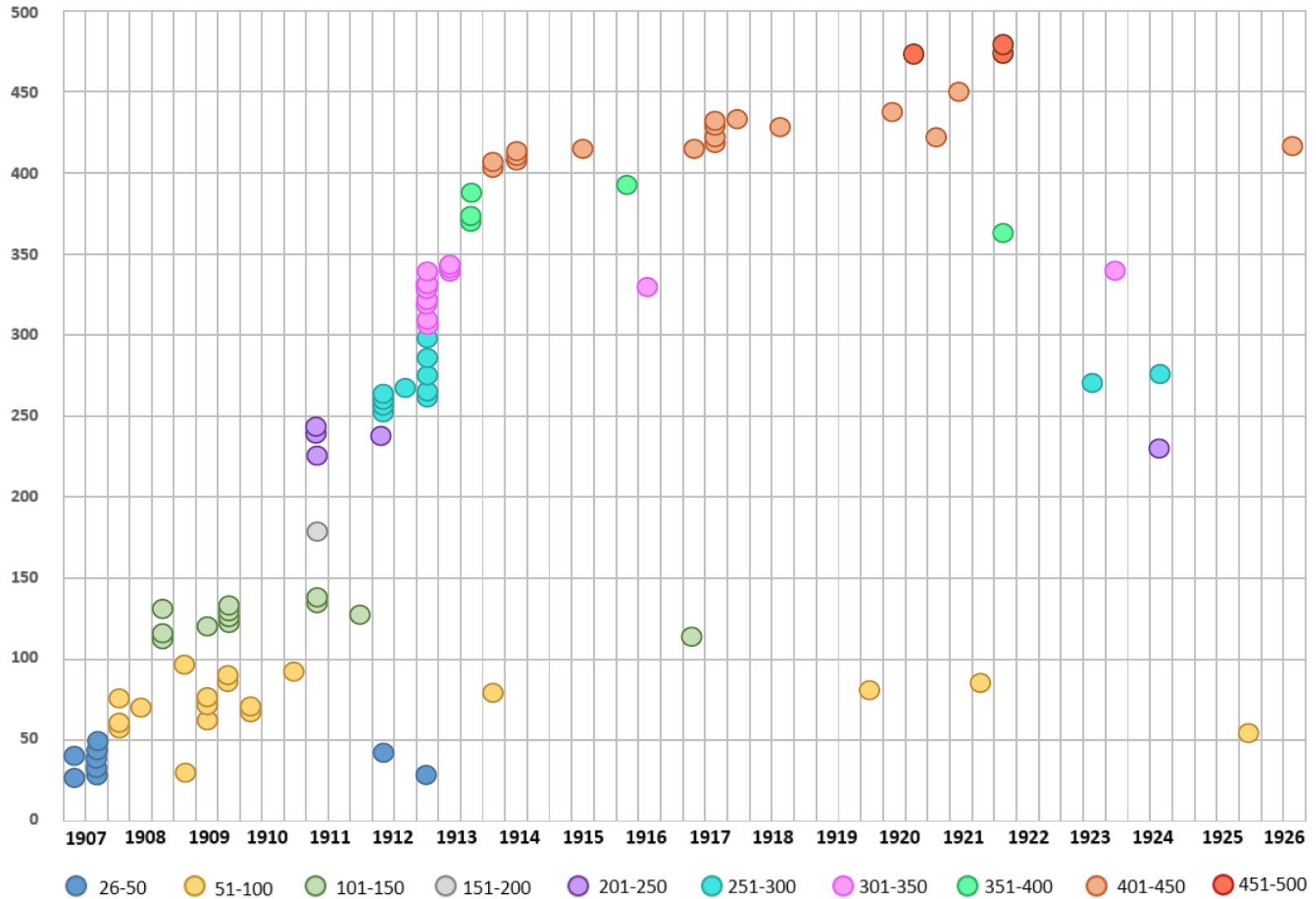
In 1915 a salesman named H. H. Sheets wrote directly to Jack Morgan, saying that over the previous 14 months he had spent \$8,000 “on my campaign for the sale of *The North American Indian*.” He asked Morgan for \$5,000 in additional support to continue his campaign, since “the declaration of war dropped the curtain upon many prospective sales.” There is no record of Morgan’s response to his request. Letter dated August 14, 1915, Box 1, Folder 6, The Morgan Library.

Probable Sets Sold: These numbers are based upon Curtis's own accounting for the period of 1911 to 1920 (detailed above), with the 1906-10 number extrapolated from the total figure given by Curtis.

Estimated Revenue: This amount is based upon the probable number of sets sold multiplied by the price for the standard edition. We don't know how many deluxe editions were sold during a given period; likewise, we don't know how many subscriptions were canceled during that period. For the purpose of these estimates, those two amounts are assumed to cancel each other out.

Appendix D

The North American Indian: Distribution of Confirmed Subscription Numbers (n=102)



This chart uses dates from 102 dated subscription agreements in the Edward S. Curtis Papers, Archives of the Pierpont Morgan Museum, New York. The archives collection is incomplete, and there are significant and intentional gaps in the known subscription numbers.

Appendix E

Comparative Value of US \$1.00, 1906-1930



This chart shows the buying power of \$1.00 compared with the same amount in 2018.

All estimates of the present-day value of dollars were determined by using the [Inflation Calculator at Officialdata.org](https://www.officialdata.org/inflation-calculator). Access Dates: May, 2018

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