

AMERICAN INDIAN FILMS

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The very rapid disappearance of the American Indian cultures over the past half century and more, a heritage rich in the extreme, is a matter of common knowledge. What is even more to the point, the almost complete disappearance of these Indian cultures in some regions has been accepted by nearly everyone as an accomplished fact. That they are irrecoverable is assumed.

Tribute is due to those anthropologists who have written over the years such a fine record of our aboriginal peoples. However, these writings, even assisted by their excellent illustrations, often lack details which can be furnished only by direct observation. Since most of these arts, crafts or customs are no longer practiced, and personal observation is therefore impossible, there is a growing tendency to turn from old time ethnology to other related fields, such as acculturation.

The writer had accepted as fact this almost total disappearance of aboriginal cultural features and the dictum that, at best, only a few vestiges remained here and there. However, late in 1956 he was asked to take several students out to see some of his old Indian friends in the region north of San Francisco Bay. He found that, while the Indians of the younger generation have so far accepted the white man's way that they know practically nothing of the ancient customs, there was, here and there, someone who ground acorns, made beads or caught fish as their forefathers did, perhaps with some modification to be sure, but still with reasonable attention to the ways of their elders. The farther we went the more of these vestigial remains came to light.

In the last years of the last century and the early years of the present one, when the writer was most actively engaged in ethnology here in California, the motion picture camera had only recently been invented. The 16 mm. camera with color film came even many years later than that.

However, beginning about 1920 the writer became so interested in the possibilities of motion pictures that he acquired a 35 mm. Universal and has used in the field one after another of several other types since. His 16 mm. Cine-Kodak saw much service in the late thirties. Then it was, through necessity, retired.

Now, here at last loomed the possibility of making a photographic record in color, accompanied where possible by sound; an actual "living record" of these vestigial remains of Indian cultures. It was too late to hope to recapture the total culture, but enough could be recorded to give a fair idea of olden times, before the impact of white contact and the resultant acculturation had completely changed everything.

Discussion of this idea with Dr. Kroeber produced two enthusiasts and resulted in a program with dual objectives:

1. The securing of a series of record films and sound recordings to be used for detailed study and analysis.
2. The production from these of a series of teaching films for use in the classroom.

The ethnologist's laboratory is (or was) the Indian settlement, out where customs can be observed at first hand. Year by year the difficulty of contact between our classes and the Indians has grown more acute. Direct observation by the student out in the field has become almost impossible.

By means of a series of color motion pictures, with sound, we could bring this laboratory into the classroom, where the student could directly observe (on the screen) the life and customs of the Indians, tribe by tribe, or subject by subject.

Furthermore, by reconstructing from the memories of the older tribesmen such arts, crafts and procedures as even they had only seen practiced by their elders, and by having these specially re-enacted with fidelity by Indians before the camera, we could project our laboratory at least a generation or two farther back.

By this means we could bring to the student far more than he could ever see for himself if he went out to the Indian village. There he would only by the merest chance see one or two of these vestigial remains of Indian cultures.

By careful re-enactment of these cultural features in full before our camera we could bring to him here in the classroom at the University the full story of one after another of these cultural features--we could, with good fortune, relive for him the whole primitive life of an area, as it existed before white contact--an ambitious program to be sure, but one with great possibilities.

In other words, we saw not a system of how to do it films, but a system of how it was done in olden times films. We could have such invaluable film demonstrations of arts, crafts, customs, ceremonies and other procedures, not only for our own classrooms in Anthropology and related disciplines, but these films could be made available to other universities and educational systems. They could serve colleges, high schools, grade schools; in fact, any other organization devoted to the spread of knowledge which did so without charge.

A broad vista unfolded before us, one of almost unlimited scope.

But first we must prove that there was present a sufficient number of these vestiges of culture, a sufficient quantity of material to give the idea potential development possibilities.

As above mentioned, the writer owned a CineKodak which had been put away in mothballs some years before. This was retrieved, dusted off and again put into commission. He secured some rolls of color film and started off on a "voyage of discovery"--to see how much he could find and how far back the clock could be turned. This first voyage yielded results beyond our expectations and satisfied us that, between cultural residues which were still in daily use, and

other features which were yet clear in the minds of the oldsters and could be re-enacted as demonstrations, we were on the right road. Pay dirt was in sight.

We succeeded in securing small appropriations, first from the Department of Anthropology Research Fund; then from the University's Institute of Social Sciences. With these we secured more film and paid necessary field expenses of transportation, maintenance and the like.

Much of this work is, of necessity, seasonal. Arrangements would be made with some Indians to demonstrate before the camera when something matured (tule or acorns, for instance). When the word arrived that the conditions were suitable and that we could come up for this work, perhaps the funds were exhausted. The work, however, had to go on. You cannot disappoint one of your Indian demonstrators who is ready to work or soon all will lose faith in you and your word. You simply keep the appointment, get the picture, and foot the bill out of your own pocket: costs of film, processing, transportation, maintenance and demonstrator's fees. It counts up when repeated often enough.

We worked on in this manner for about four years. The further we went, the more we found of these residual cultural features still in use. For example, we suddenly, one day, came upon an Indian fishing with a plunge net, something we supposed to be only a matter of memory for years past. The most surprising reconstruction we encountered was that of the sinew-backed bow.

Informants had given us to understand that in very ancient times the best bows were made down on the Lower Klamath River. However, everyone knows that no sinew-backed bow has been made anywhere for 75 or 80 years. Imagine our surprise when we were told by an acquaintance of Mrs. Meighan that he had seen only that very day an old man making a sinew-backed bow. A visit there the following day verified the truth of this statement. The circumstances were these: Homer Cooper is somewhere between 80 and 90 years of age. In his youth his family lived near the mouth of the Klamath River. Their nearest neighbor was a very old man, a bowyer. The Yurok Indians practiced professionalism, and their arts and crafts reached correspondingly high degrees of proficiency. A man who was a bowyer confined his activities to the making of bows, which he sold or traded to others for such commodities as he might need.

Homer lived near this bowyer and used to watch him almost constantly, fascinated by the practice of his craft. He thereby learned all the phases of bow making and was so interested in bows that he finally begged so hard that his mother secured one for him and he enjoyed practicing with it. Now, in his last years, he decided to try to recall all the steps in bow making. He has succeeded admirably, producing, at the time we first visited him, quite a number of these old-type bows. As above mentioned, Yurok bows were, according to various of our informants, the finest bows ever made in California, made right here at the mouth of the Klamath and traded out from there as a focal center to surrounding tribes.

To be sure, we found Homer using glue from a bottle and paints from cans. We inquired whether he knew how to make the aboriginal glue and received the reply: "Yes, but why should I bother to do so. I can go down to the store and for a few cents buy a bottle of glue which serves my purpose just as well." We

told him that we would like to make a picture of the entire process of bow-making but that if we did, we wanted to have the bow made in the old-fashioned way, entirely with old-fashioned materials, just as the Indians did back in the days when they had no resources like the trading post or the corner store. He agreed that he could produce "Indian glue," as he called it, if given a little time. The same was the story with the paints. We arranged with him to procure all these ancient needfuls, and drop us a note. We would then come up to make this picture.

In about a month a letter arrived from Homer. We went up and made the picture of the bow-making. Later we made a picture showing the making of the arrow to go along with the bow. Finally, we photographed Homer shooting this bow and arrow, with the release he had learned as a boy. Thus, diligent inquiry far and wide finally turned up one man (and only one) who knew this ancient craft and was able to demonstrate it for us from the depths of his memory.

A number of such instances have been already encountered, where we dealt with and secured information and demonstrations from the last remaining tribesman to profess any knowledge of a certain craft. Such an instance is that of our balsa building. Careful search turned up an old man, who, while he had not actually made one of these boats, had in his boyhood assisted an uncle in doing so. This was Harry Holmes, an ordained minister, who finally agreed to try his hand at making such a craft. Back in 1916 I had had made, for the Milwaukee Public Museum, a Pomo tule balsa. Harry and I discussed the whole matter thoroughly over a large photograph of this boat. The picture showed all details and I thought everything about the work was thoroughly understood. However, again we had to await the ripening of the tule.

When this time came the arrangement was that Harry was to gather the tule and have it ready on the lakeshore and that I was to come up on a Monday morning to commence photographing the boat building. Now, the Pomo Indians in ancient times made, not only a tule boat which was actually boat-shaped, but also a raft consisting of several small bundles of tule lashed together. Upon my arrival I found that Harry's notion of a tule boat was one of these flat rafts, even though we had already carefully talked over the boat that he had seen in the picture. A very lengthy discussion followed in which Harry maintained that he simply would not undertake to make one of the boat-shaped balsas, but was going to make what he called "the flat-bottomed boat, just like the one up in the museum in Lakeport."

This discussion proceeded all morning and at about a quarter of twelve I looked at my watch and remarked that it was about time for lunch and suggested that Harry and I go up to Lakeport, have lunch, then go to the museum and see just what kind of a "flat-bottomed boat" he was talking about. This idea of having lunch was a very acceptable one to him and away we went.

Inspection of this so-called flat-bottomed boat showed that it was nothing more than a raft of small bundles of tule. Again we discussed the matter and I was very insistent that the people that we were making this boat for didn't want one of these flat-bottomed ones but a real boat-shaped balsa, and I suggested that we ought to build them what they wanted. This was a new idea to Harry and he was very agreeable to it. Then he said, "Why didn't you come up here yesterday?" My reply was that, since yesterday was Sunday and he was a minister, he

couldn't be expected to work on a boat on Sunday. "Yes, of course, that is true but we could talk. We could do just like the lawyers do. They get together and argue and argue and argue. Then they go to court for a few minutes, and the case is all settled. If you had come up here yesterday we could have done all this talking, then, and we could have had the boat half done by now."

The construction of this boat led to the making of a total of five of these canoes and a thorough-going series of pictures of their construction. However, no more of these canoes are likely to be made for the reason that this old gentleman passed away a few months ago, and with him went the knowledge of how such crafts were built. To be sure, all the details of balsa building are fully recorded and preserved in our film and someone could easily revive this craft if desired.

It is obviously only among the very old men and women that such knowledge remains. And it is very necessary that this knowledge and experience of theirs be recorded just as quickly as possible and before they pass away. In fact, we have had already a number of instances in which an old man (one 89 years of age, for example) passed away before he had been able to finish some item which required a time lapse for curing purposes before the next step could be undertaken. We do not know at present of anyone who can complete this particular article.

These are examples of the urgency of this work and are cited to show why it must be done now or never. When these old people pass away the younger generation has no knowledge of such matters and cares nothing about them. This condition, combined with the aversion to picture taking on the part of some of the Indians who do know how to do these various things, makes it very difficult. We sometimes find someone whom we know definitely is able to make some object or to perform some procedure but whose aversion to having his picture taken makes him reluctant to do so.

This aversion stems from one or both of the following causes. Some of these people, old or young, have a deep-rooted, natural aversion to having a picture taken because they do not want their likenesses in the hands of someone else. Another group comprises those who are afraid that, if a motion picture is taken, it is going to get into the hands of someone who will commercialize it and make a real pot of money out of it. It is necessary at all times to combat both these ideas in different individuals; sometimes in the same one.

No statement is more frequently made to these Indians than that "No one is making a red cent out of the project, that no one can buy or rent a single foot of this film, and that none of it will ever be shown on any commercial screen; that it is made strictly for scientific purposes and will be used only in educational institutions and by organizations devoting themselves strictly to educational purposes."

One of the serious difficulties with many of the films which have been made by field workers who have not been trained in all the ways of film making is that they come up with a patently unprofessional type of film. As above indicated, we started out to make a series of record films and, before we had proceeded too far, we realized the importance of professionalization. In

conjunction, therefore, with the Motion Picture Production Department of University Extension here in Berkeley, we have made a combination of the anthropologist's scientific accuracy and of the professional film maker's technical skill. Care is required to keep these two in balance.

Calling upon accumulated years of ethnological field experience and all the data the literature has on record, we choose a subject and a likely group or groups of Indians. Then we discuss the subject with the older men and women of the tribe, constantly probing for details of the old way of life--the way of their grandfathers and grandmothers. When we have a relatively clear picture of the steps involved, we prepare an outline of the procedures. This is merely an outline, and shows about what can be expected to happen next as the action progresses. It is in no sense a shooting script to be followed to the letter. The native demonstrator can not be fenced in by such a script if he is really to demonstrate his ancient craft or procedure uninhibited. He is always told to do whatever would be done in the old-fashioned way, just as his grandfather would have done before the white man came. He is to omit nothing, no matter how trivial it may seem, but is to adhere strictly to all the aboriginal features.

Not infrequently some well-meaning white person may start to offer some suggestions. He is immediately stopped and reminded that we are recording the way the Indians did things in olden times. If he persists and tries to argue the point, he may even have to be told gently that whenever we want to know how a white man would do this particular thing we will ask him to step before the camera and demonstrate. In all our pictures the Indian way (the aboriginal Indian way of the elders) is adhered to throughout. Emphasis is placed upon this use of the outline in contradistinction to the usual shooting script of the professional film maker, which usually calls for a detailed layout of each move and angle in the shooting of the film and which may even prescribe the dialog that is to be used.

Such controlled action has no more place in the production of an ethnological documentary film than it would have in the making of a film on the natural life of the giraffe. In each case the film is designed to show what actually happens in the uninhibited ways of each subject. If the Indian demonstrator is to be hedged in by a script, then our giraffe should be penned up in a zoo.

It is very true that now and then a demonstrator will get off the track and will do something which is not strictly according to the old-fashioned way. When this happens he usually calls attention to it himself and stands ready to make the necessary correction. Otherwise a little judicious questioning brings out just how the thing should have been done. We then get him to repeat so that we can make the correction. In 99 percent of the demonstrations, however, the Indian, when left to his own devices, will follow through when he understands that the real "old-fashioned way" is what we want. In fact, that is just exactly what he wants. Anyone who is interested enough to put on a demonstration for us of any one of these old procedures wants them correct.

We do have to make some concessions to modernism in the matter of clothing and various things of that sort. These are not only permissible, but mandatory. In all this, however, there shines out the "old-fashioned way" and we are able thereby to get a true record of the habitual, ancient procedure.

Throughout all of the filming and recording, due regard must be taken of the technical requirements of the professional film maker. The details of actually shooting the film are in his hands and every facility is afforded him to make a full and complete recording of all phases of the action from as many angles as possible. In his hands also are the sound recordings, for where music, speeches or other sound recordings can be obtained, these are secured in the field.

In addition to the actual shooting out in the open, the film must then be processed and work-printed. Only then can we see the results we have obtained and know if any phase must be amplified or re-shot. The film must be cut and edited (and sometimes re-edited). When the final assemblage is made and approved for its factual accuracy and for its filmic virtues, the narration is prepared. Not only must this narration adhere strictly to scientific fact, but it must tell the full story of everything in the film. Furthermore, it must be tailored very accurately to the film in hand. This may require shortening a section of film here and there or lengthening some of the narration in another place. When film and narration are properly tailored to each other, the two are paced together and then the narrator is called in and the narration is taped. The laboratory then produces the final answer print, wedding the film to the narration, and with any sound effects which may be required. Titles, credit lines and everything else needed is added to produce the finished film ready to be shown on the screen.

All our films are copyrighted by the Board of Regents of the University. The use of our films is restricted solely to educational and non-profit institutions.

As stated at the outset, our project has two main objectives:

1. To secure the fullest possible records of the ancient cultures that can be made at this late date.
2. To select from these, suitable footages and sound recordings and to make teaching aids for use in our classrooms here at the University and in other educational institutions desiring them.

Of these original record films we have already, at the end of the first year, a considerable number which are completed; various others are largely done but still require, for seasonal or other reasons, some additions. These together total about two dozen subjects. All will eventually comprise source material for research in our Anthropology Museum. Of teaching films we have about ready for release several subjects. Others are in various stages of completion. Among these is one series on basketry which will comprise five films. These teaching films vary in length from so-called "shorts" to those occupying a maximum of thirty, or, at most, forty minutes. All are kept within the time limit of a regular class period. When a subject requires more extended treatment, as in the basketry film series above mentioned, it is divided into two or more units.

We have had the cooperation of museums and other institutions where re-pose collections of Indian material. We have had cooperation from many workers in the field (including Canada and Mexico) and of old residents in various

localities who can point the way to finding some of the older Indians and who have a knowledge of their wisdom and craftsmanship. We have also had the cooperation of many of the Indians in various parts. The list of these cooperators is too long to give in detail here but our sincere thanks are due to all of them. We are especially appreciative of the cooperation of our co-workers in the Department of Anthropology and in the University Extension.

A word should be said about the direction of this project. During the inception of this work and during its formative years I had the invaluable advice of my lifelong friend, Dr. A. L. Kroeber. From the first he, as principal investigator, and I, as assistant investigator, were co-directors of this project. Everything had been planned by us in unison. Decisions on objectives, policies and general procedures were all made jointly. It was our mutual understanding that all matters of production, finance and other details were to be handled by me. These policies had grown up and had been in effect for four years before the first year's grant by the National Science Foundation placed our project on a solid footing. They were unaltered in any way after the grant was received. In fact, only the second day before Dr. Kroeber started for Europe, we held a long conference and reviewed our project, its history and policies; also we went over its immediate prospective work.

It is with the deepest regret that it is necessary to record that only five days after our first field work, as a National Science Foundation project was started, Dr. Kroeber passed away in Paris, on October 5, 1960.

We were thus confronted with a situation which had far-reaching consequences; one of these was that our project was without its principal investigator. Inasmuch as, from the first, I had participated so fully in every phase of the work of the project, the authorities of the University asked me to become principal investigator and to carry on the work of the project as its director. This was approved by the National Science Foundation and the project has, therefore, since continued on this basis. This change was necessary for the handling of the finances of the project, if for no other reason.

Highly gratifying is the fact that a new grant for this project, continuing it on an amplified basis for the year 1961-62, has been made by the National Science Foundation.

ENDNOTES

1. The original title of our project on film making is a long and descriptive one consisting of twenty-five words. When the project, after its approval by the National Science Foundation, finally went to the business office of the University, someone looked at this long descriptive name and decided that it was impractical for use in the accounting office. They shortened it to simply "American Indian Films." This all-embracing, simple term has been accepted by everyone as a fitting title.
2. This discovery was made by Mrs. J. J. Meighan up at Ishi Pishi Falls on the Upper Klamath River. Very early in this investigation into the possibilities of this work Mrs. Meighan volunteered her assistance in this field work. Her keen interest in Anthropology and in motion picture work made her help most valuable and contributed greatly to the success of this pilot undertaking.