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EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY

History records that Ishi, a.k.a. the Last Yahi, the Stone Age Ishi Between Two Worlds, was captured by northern Californians in 1911 and dutifully turned over to anthropologists. He spent the rest of his life in a museum in San Francisco. (And you think your life is boring.)

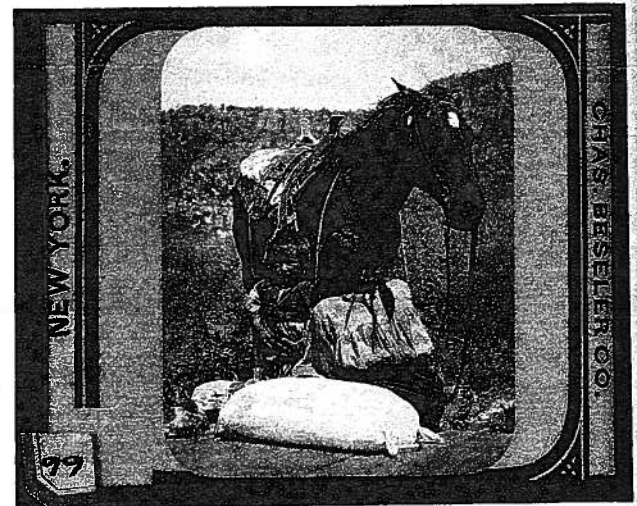
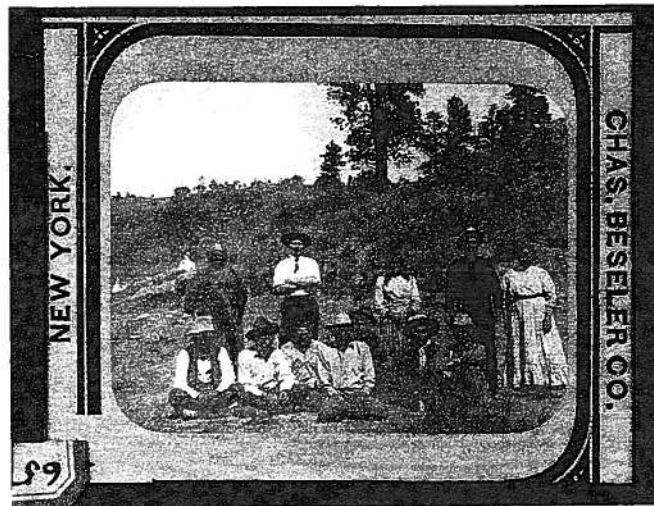
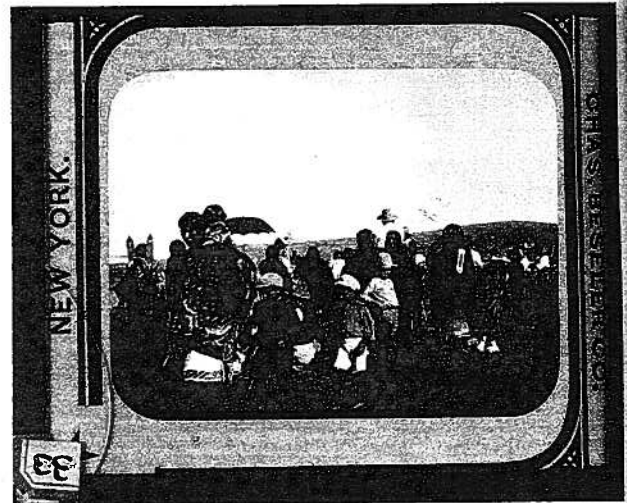
They said Ishi was the last North American Indian untouched by civilization. I don't know about that, but it's clear he was really country and seriously out of touch with recent developments. We're talking major hayseed here, at least.

His keepers turned down all vaudeville, circus, and theatrical offers for the living caveman, but they weren't above a little cheap amusement themselves. One day they took Ishi on a field trip to Golden Gate Park. An early aviator named Harry Fowler was attempting a cross-country flight. You can imagine the delicious anticipation of the anthropologists. The Ishi Man vs. the Flying Machine. What would he make of this miracle, this impossible vision, this technological triumph? The aeroplane roared off into the heavens and circled back over the park. The men of science turned to the Indian, expectantly. Would he quake? Tremble? Would they hear his death song?

Ishi looked up at the plane overhead. He spoke in a tone his biographers would describe as one of "mild interest." "White man up there?"

Twenty years later my grandfather would become the first Comanche frequent flyer. Robert Chaat was born at the turn of the century in Oklahoma, when it was still Indian Territory. It was our darkest hour. The Comanche Nation was in ruins, wrecked and defeated. The Army did a census at this time and found that 1,171 of us were still alive.

Grandpa Chaat was one of those holocaust survivors. He was a tireless fighter for the Jesus Road, who battled the influence of peyote and forbade his children to attend powwows. Yet he also taught pride in being Indian and conducted services



in Comanche into the late 1960s. His generation was pretty much raised by the Army, who beat them for speaking Indian and had them march like soldiers to school. Geronimo was the local celebrity, and my grandfather remembers meeting him before the old guy died in 1909. Fort Sill was a small place; I guess everyone knew Geronimo.

My mother remembers her dad's trips to Chicago and New York when air travel was often a two-day adventure. He sent his five children trinkets from the 1939 World's Fair, newspaper clippings about his speeches around the country, pictures of himself with Norman Vincent Peale.

She discovered the lantern slides on a trip back to Oklahoma in 1991. They were in a battered and ancient black case buried deep in a closet. These closets have given up more and more secrets as time has passed. A few years earlier, when Grandpa still lived in the tiny house in Medicine Park (soon he would move to a nursing home in town) he produced an eagle feather from one of those closets. The feather, he told my mother, belonged to an ancestor who was a medicine man.

The forty-eight square glass slides are about three by four inches, at least an eighth of an inch thick. Each has its own slot in the felt-lined case. They're heavy: a single one weighs more than an entire box of their modern equivalents. Generously engineered with metal and glass instead of cardboard and film, they are about as similar to today's slides as a 1937 Packard is to this year's Honda.

They show Indian lodges, tipis, Comanches of all ages in brilliant clothing, buffalo, horses, wagons, Quanah Parker's Star House, all in vivid, lifelike color.

Their meaning and purpose? Fund-raising, of course. There were even a few pledge cards scattered about the case, reading: "Indian Mission Fund. I pledge to pay the sum of _____ before May 1, 19____." I could see Grandpa lugging his twenty pounds of glass slides through airports (still called "fields") because they would have been too precious to check through, the key to next year's budget or the church's building fund.

But what were these pictures? Mom could identify some of the locations and people, but most of them she could not. Maybe they weren't even Comanche. Perhaps the Dutch Reformed Church had a media consultant who put it together. The label points in this direction—it says: "Chas. Beseler Co., New York," not some outfit in Lawton or Oklahoma City. Grandpa might have sent along a few of his own pictures, and the rest, for all we know, might have been from a photo agency in Manhattan.

To me the Indians in the pictures seem dignified, friendly, open to religious instruction and new cultural ideas. I imagine listening to Grandpa in a church meeting room in New York or Boston in 1937, hearing about the struggle for

redemption and a better way of life. A people at a crossroads, he might say. The images underline his script: Indians in blankets with papooses on their back next to Indians in starched western shirts and bandannas, posing for the camera on their way to a Jimmie Rodgers show. We see, ridiculously, an umbrella next to a wagon.

Which will it be, the blanket or the Bible?

On second thought, it's obvious the Indians are resistance fighters pretending to cooperate. See that look in their eyes? They are American hostages denouncing imperialism in a flat, dull voice for the Hezbollah. They steal the photographer's gun when he's not looking. At the gourd dance tonight in the foothills of Mount Scott, they make plans for the future, plans the city fathers won't like.

We have been using photography for our own ends as long as we've been flying, which is to say as long as there have been cameras and airplanes. The question isn't *whether* we love photography, but instead *why* we love it so much. From the Curtis stills to our own Kodachrome slides and Polaroid prints and Camcorder tapes, it's obvious we are a people who adore taking pictures and having pictures taken of us.

So it should hardly be a surprise that everything about being Indian has been shaped by the camera.

In this relationship we're portrayed as victims, dupes, losers, and dummies. Lo, the poor fool posing for Edward Curtis wearing the Cheyenne headdress even though he's Navajo. Lo, those pathetic Indian extras in a thousand bad westerns. Don't they have any pride?

I don't know, maybe they dug it. Maybe it was fun. Contrary to what most people (Indians and non-Indians alike) now believe, our true history is one of constant change, technological innovation, and intense curiosity about the world. How else do you explain our instantaneous adaptation to horses, rifles, flour, and knives?

The camera, however, was more than another tool we could adapt to our own ends. It helped make us what we are today.

See, we only became Indians once the armed struggle was over in 1890. Before then we were Shoshone or Mohawk or Crow. For centuries North America was a complicated, dangerous place full of shifting alliances between the United States and Indian nations, among the Indian nations themselves, and between the Indians and Canada, Mexico, and half of Europe.

This happy and confusing time ended forever that December morning a century ago at Wounded Knee. Once we no longer posed a military threat, we became Indians, all of us more or less identical in practical terms, even though until that mo-

ment, and for thousands of years before, we were as different from one another as Greeks are from Swedes. The Comanches, for example, were herded onto a reservation with the Kiowa and the Apache, who not only spoke different languages, but were usually enemies. (We hated Apaches even more than Mexicans.)

The truth is we didn't know a damn thing about being Indian. This information was missing from our Original Instructions. We had to figure it out as we went along.

The new century beckoned. Telegraphs, telephones, movies; the building blocks of mass culture were in place, or being invented. These devices would fundamentally change life on the planet. They were new to us, but they were almost as new to everyone else.

At this very moment, even as bullets and arrows were still flying, Sitting Bull joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and became our first pop star. Like an early Warhol he sold his autograph for pocket change, and like Mick Jagger he noticed that fame made getting dates easier. He toured the world as if he owned it, made some money, became even more famous than he already was. Afraid of cameras? *Talk to my agent first* is more like it.

It was an interesting career move, even if it couldn't prevent the hysterical U.S. overreaction to the Ghost Dance that resulted in his assassination the same month as the Wounded Knee massacre.

Some think of Sitting Bull as foolish and vain. No doubt Crazy Horse felt this way. The legendary warrior hated cameras and never allowed himself to be photographed, although this didn't stop the U.S. Postal Service from issuing a Crazy Horse stamp in the 1980s. Maybe Sitting Bull was ego-tripping, but I see him as anxious to figure out the shape of this new world.

For John Ford, King Vidor, Raoul Walsh and the other early kings of Hollywood, the Indian wars were more or less current events. Cecil B. DeMille, who made over thirty Indian dramas, was fifteen at the time of Wounded Knee. They grew up in a world in which relatives and friends had been, or could have been, direct participants in the Indian wars.

The promise of film was to deliver what the stage could not, and the taming of the frontier, the winning of the West, the building of the nation was the obvious, perfect choice. Indians and Hollywood. We grew up together.

This has really screwed us sometimes, for example the stupid macho posturing by some of our movement leaders in the 1970s. (If only their parents had said, *Kids! Turn that TV off and do your homework!* we might have actually won our treaty rights.)

But maybe it's better to be vilified and romanticized than completely ignored. And battles over historical revisionism seem doomed from the start, because the last thing these images are about is what really happened in the past. They're fables being told to shape the future.

All of the lame bullshit, the mascots, the pickup truck commercials, the New Age know-nothings, I used to find it embarrassing. Now I think it's part of the myth to think all that is bogus and the good old days were the real thing. The tacky, dumb stuff about this country is the real thing now. The appropriation of Indian symbols that began with the earliest days of European contact is over, complete. Today, nothing is quite as American as the American Indian. We've become a patriotic symbol.

For our part, we dimly accept the role of Spiritual Masters and First Environmentalists as we switch cable channels and videotape our weddings and ceremonies. We take pride in westerns that make us look gorgeous (which we are!) and have good production values. We secretly wish we were more like the Indians in the movies.

And for the Americans, who drive Pontiacs and Cherokees and live in places with Indian names, like Manhattan and Chicago and Idaho, we remain a half-remembered presence, both comforting and dangerous, lurking just below the surface.

We are hopelessly fascinated with each other, locked in an endless embrace of love and hate and narcissism. Together we are condemned, forever to disappoint, never to forget even as we can't remember. Our snapshots and home movies create an American epic. It's fate, destiny. And why not? We are the country, and the country is us.

(What? No flash again?!)