
Traditional Native American Ball Games in the Early 20th Century As Recorded by Edward S. Curtis, Artist with a Camera

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The native North American has long been the subject of a number of artists working with palette and brush; it remained for a Seattle artist, Edward S. Curtis, working with a camera to come almost at the last moment to record the customs and character of the American Indian in all his ancient glory. Beginning in 1898 Curtis recorded on film with explanatory text a photo-history of eighty tribes west of the Missouri River. The ambitious project was not completed until 1930. The final published work, *The North American Indian*, extended to twenty volumes of text, each of which was accompanied by a portfolio volume of plates selected from over forty thousand negatives.

Curtis' aim was to record the cardinal points, as he called them, of Indian life of all important tribes of the United States and Alaska that still retained to a considerable degree their primitive customs and traditions. Games and pastimes were one of the twenty-five cardinal points that Curtis researched. The general purpose of this study was to determine

whether traditional native American ball games continued to be positive culture traits of the American Indian seen by Curtis in the early twentieth century.

Of the eighty tribes observed by Curtis, thirty-eight possessed at least one traditional native American game of ball as a positive culture trait. While tribes from the California, Northwest Coast, Great Plains, Arctic, and Great Basin culture areas were most likely to still be playing such games, only the Subarctic culture area was without a ball game. Four ball games were being played by the native American: shinny, doubleball, kickball, and carryball. Shinny was the most common game with the widest distribution among tribes. Doubleball and kickball had more limited distribution while the distribution of carryball was extremely limited. Each game of ball was played with a strong degree of similarity although numerous variations did exist. Of the scores of currently told myths Curtis included in his work, few contained references to ball games. The games of shinny and kickball were the only ball games included in the oral tradition of the tribes Curtis observed.

In summary, the field research of the photo-artist, Edward S. Curtis, revealed that early in the twentieth century, traditional native American ball games continued to be positive culture traits of a number of native North American tribes west of the Missouri River.